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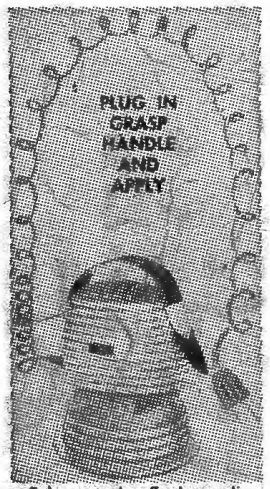

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 60, No. 1 SEPTEMBER, 1955

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*

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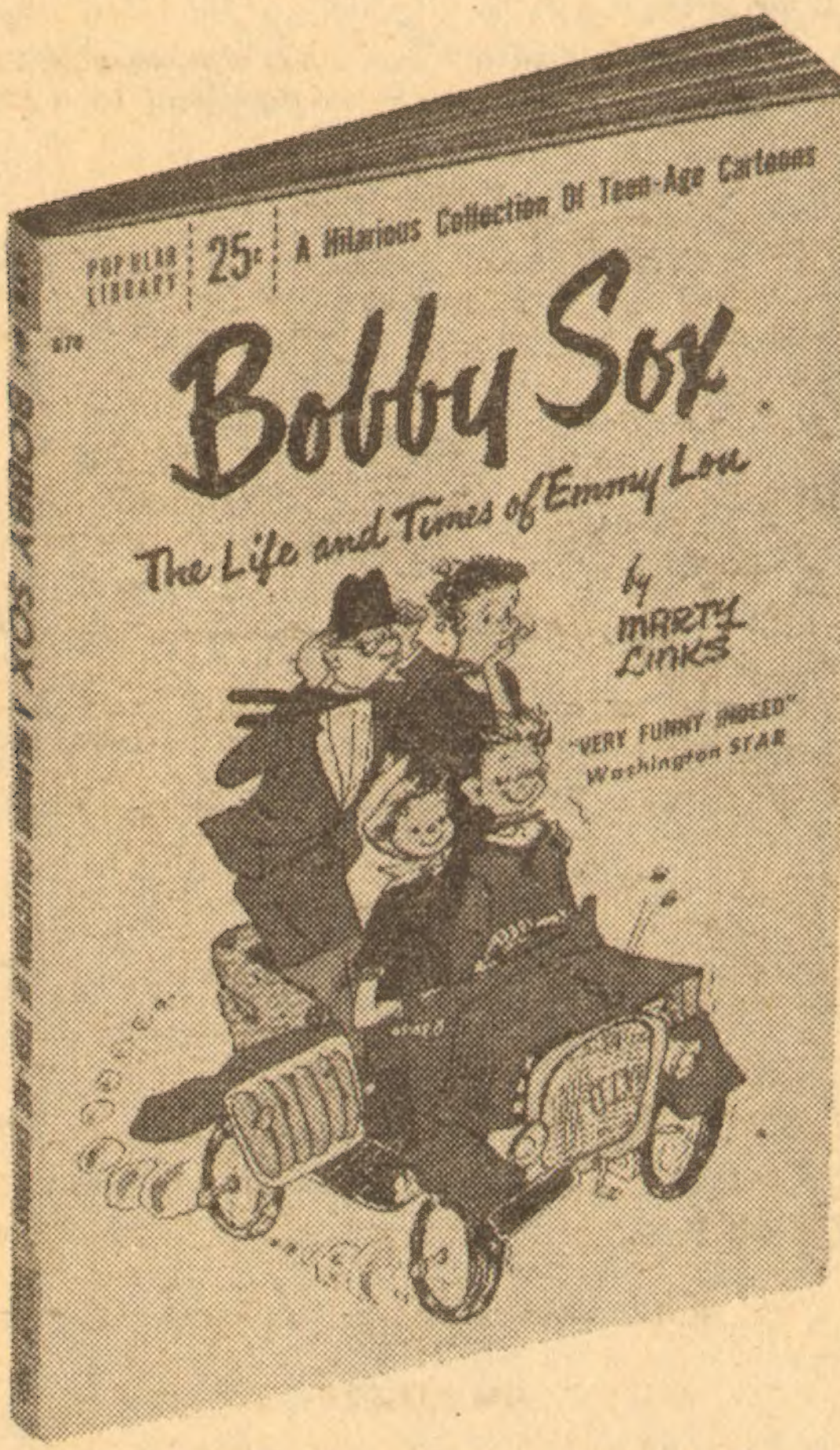

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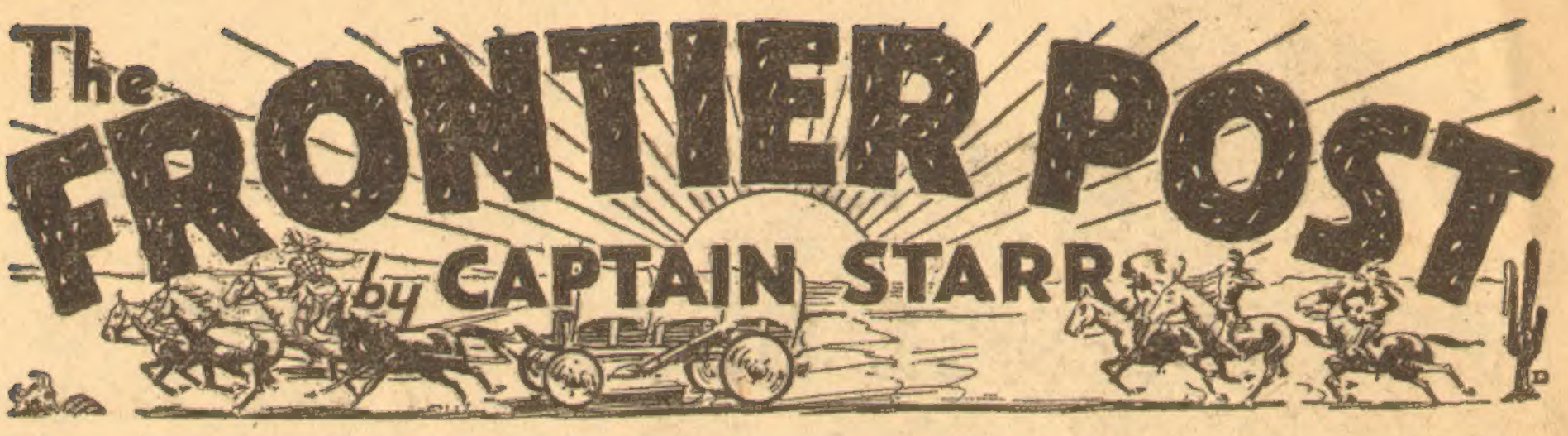

The General's Mare

OFF HAND, you might not think there could be any connection between a lost Mexican general's horse and a historic U. S. Navy base. But the facts of the matter are these:

A good number of decades ago this Mexican general, name of Vallejo, was sailing along on a make-shift raft of whale-oil barrels at the mouth of the Napa River on California's San Pablo Bay, north of San Francisco.

What he was doing was shipping some livestock to Benecia, a town he had taken over pretty much for himself. This Vallejo was quite a big shot and commanded the area that is now California.

Anyway, a tremendous windstorm came along and upset the general's whale-oil barrel raft. The livestock had to bestir themselves and swim for their lives. A white mare gallantly bucked the raging waters and made it to shore on a small, flat nearby island.

Mare Island

General Vallejo, in addition to being a top Mexican officer, was also quite a sentimentalist. He'd named Benecia, his headquarter's town, after his wife. And now, his hectic raft voyage over, he found himself thinking back to the strong-hearted white mare making it so staunchly across the billowing bay, and the more he thought about it the more impressed and touched he was by it all.

So he named the flat, little island to which the mare had swum, Isla de la Yegua.

Now that sounds awfully grand and poetic, but what it really means, in the gringo tongue, is Mare Island.

Some years later, when the U. S. Navy decided to establish a base on the West Coast, it wasn't sure just where the best place for it would be. The nation's newly acquired coastline stretched out for hundreds of miles, and how could anyone pick out one small spot?

But the Navy found itself intrigued by a place with the picturesque name of Mare Island, and decided to have a look at it. It did, was surprisingly impressed, and so it came about that the great Commodore David Farragut, 100 years ago, set up the Navy's first Pacific Coast base. This gave the nation's sea forces its first toehold in the western ocean, an event of great significance not only in the Navy's but the nation's history, opening, as it did, our interest in the Orient.

Naval Stronghold

To this day, the flat, little island to which the white mare swam so bravely on a gale-swept day, remains one of the Navy's most important holdings. Many people do not know it but, except for Vladivostok and Siberia, Mare Island is the only submarine construction base on the Pacific.

Of course, it wasn't only the mare's feat, but the sentimental general's taking notice of it that was to be important to posterity. And it is happy to note that the Mexican commandant has not been forgotten. For the town that sprung up across the straits from this Naval base has been known as Vallejo; and Vallejo, wtih a population of 80,000 is a thriving, progressive town that's definitely here to stay. Not too far away, the town of Benicia, which he so graciously named for his wife, also remains.

So, as you can see, the raft voyaging general, his mare and his wife have become an indelible part of our history. And somehow, if one may be permitted to toss in an editorial comment, it seems quite fitting.

He had to prove to himself that he wasn't yellow

BULLET FOR A COWARD

by Seth Kantor

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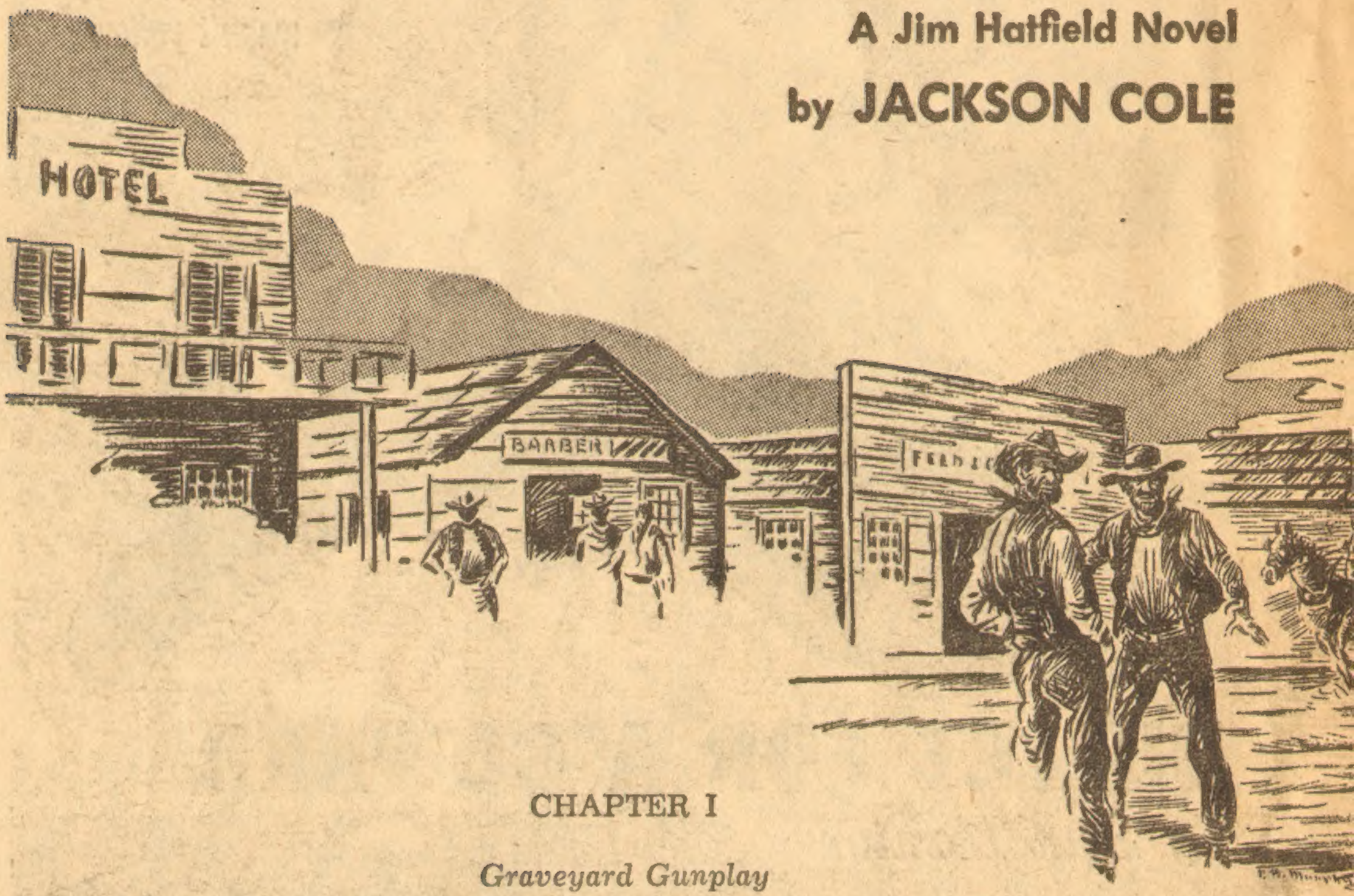
Cold Trail

A Jim Hatfield Novel

by JACKSON COLE



CHAPTER I

Graveyard Gunplay

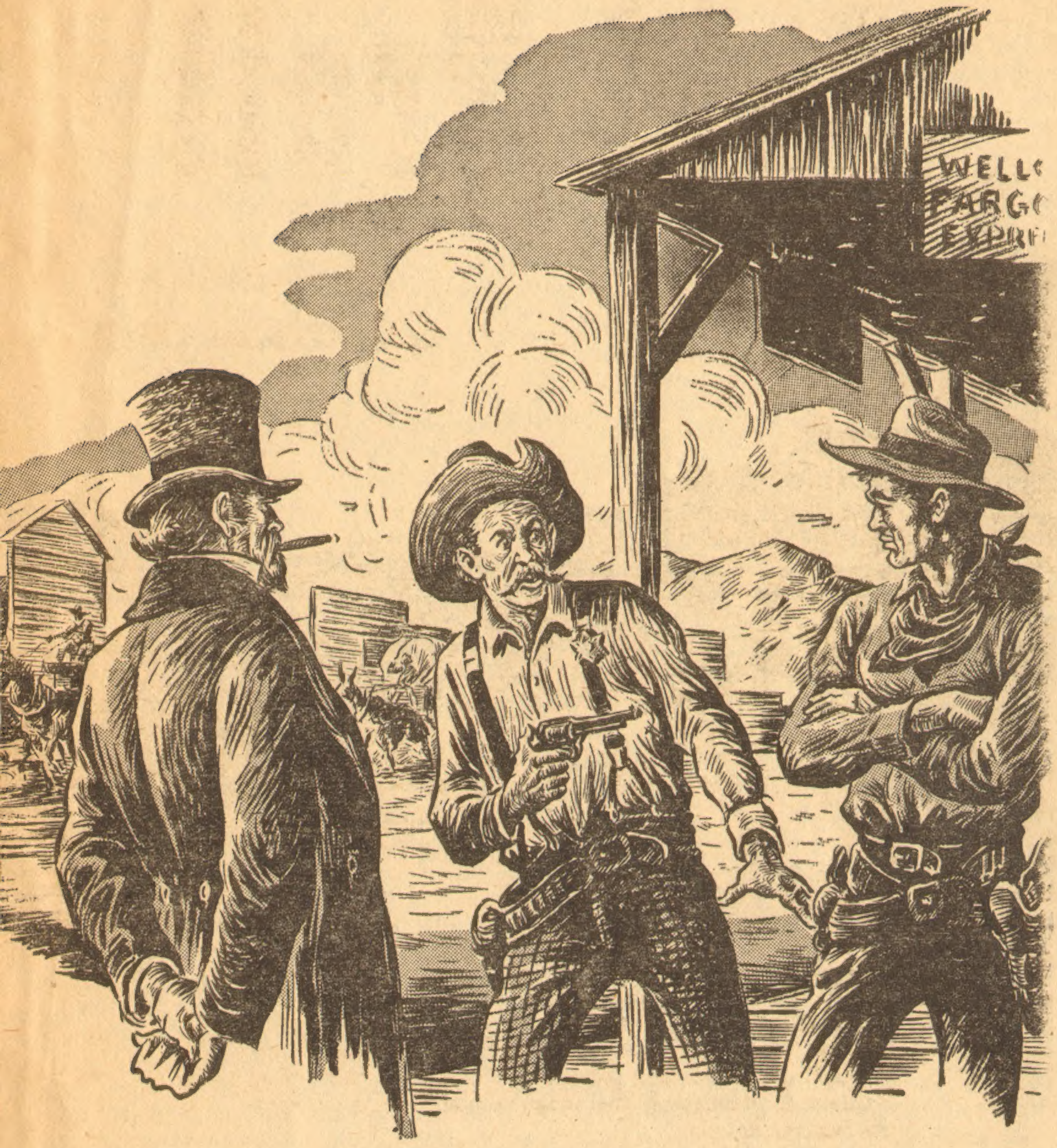
SINCE daybreak, Jim Hatfield had been riding northward across the Texas desert. Now, where the Old Spanish Trail topped a foothill spur of the Guadalupe range, he found his first trace of civilization. A weathered signboard, identifying the town spread haphazardly on the further flats:

TARANTULA, TEXAS

This spot was a good twenty miles off the El Paso road which the Texas Ranger had been following west of the Pecos. Another signboard caught his eye, sand-scoured like the first:

NO GUN-TOTING ALLOWED UNLESS RIDING THROUGH

Hatfield cuffed his flat-crowned stetson back from his forehead and hooked a chaps-clad knee over the pommel, sizing up the town below. The shacks and stores faced



Though the trace of murder in Tarantula was eighteen years cold,

the Lone Wolf drew some sizzling hot lead trying to follow i

the mouth of a canyon which snaked for miles back into the sterile Guadalupe wastelands. The tawny, barren heights receded into the distance, reaching for a heat-hazed skyline.

Tarantula was an ugly town, as ugly as its name. Two generations back it had been a watering stop on the southern overland trail. It had been a Comanche rancheria when the conquistadores passed through this country.

Rolling a smoke, Hatfield, who was here now to carry out a promise made years before to the widow of a man who had met his death by violence in Tarantula, was remembering the first time he had ever heard of this obscure west-Texas settlement so far off the beaten path. It had been over in San Saba five years back, he recalled. While working on a Ranger case in that area he had boarded for a few weeks at the home of a little white-haired widow, Opal Dunning, who was confined to a wheel-chair. One day Mrs. Dunning had said to him:

"If your Ranger duties should ever take you to a little town on the edge of the Guadalupes named Tarantula, would you look up my husband's grave? Karl had made a gold strike back in the mountains—over fifteen years ago—and had been on his way home, hoping to get back before our daughter was born. He wrote me from this town of Tarantula, where he was to board a stage. He said he was bringing back a boot full of gold-dust, as quick as he could record his mining claim in the Tarantula courthouse."

BUT Karl Dunning never reached home, the widow had said sadly. A week after her daughter was born, Mrs. Dunning had received a letter from the sheriff in Tarantula, containing heart-breaking news. Hatfield had seen that faded, dog-eared letter, the old lady's last memento of her husband. He could recall its text now, although it had been mislaid in his memory for half a decade.

August 10, 1871

Mrs. Karl Dunning,
San Saba, Texas.

Regret to inform you that a prospector, identified from a letter of yours in his possession as your husband, Karl Dunning, became intoxicated while visiting Tarantula and was bucked off a horse and killed. Burial was made in the local church cemetery. We will mail you his personal belongings. Death ocurred July 4.

HOLT JEFFRIES, Sheriff
Tarantula, Tex.

"Nothing can ever make me believe Karl died that sort of a death," Mrs. Dunning had told Hatfield. "He never ever touched liquor. And the boot full of gold-dust has never been located to this day. Mr. Hatfield, what could I do, invalided by childbirth, unable to walk again? Karlita, the baby, is eighteen now—attending school in San Antone. The mystery of her father's death has always preyed on her mind, too, ever since she was old enough to learn about it."

"You mean, you suspect your husband was murdered?" the Ranger asked.

"Yes! I'll always believe he was murdered. No boot full of gold was in the belongings Sheriff Jeffries mailed back to me. He wrote that Karl must have been joking about that. But I'll go to my own grave believing that my man was ambushed and that gold stolen from him—and the killing made to look like an accident to a drunken man."

The thought of investigating Karl Dunning's death, at this late date, had never occurred to Hatfield. But he had promised Mrs. Dunning that if he ever reached Tarantula, he would find out whether her husband's grave was being tended. Even that casual promise had faded in the Ranger's memory—until he had been reminded of it this morning in his camp down on the El Paso stage road when daylight had revealed a sign painted on a rock. An arrow pointing northward across the desert had read:

TARANTULA, 20 MILES

Hatfield was on his way to El Paso on a routine Ranger errand. He was in no hurry. Without being quite sure why he did, he had reined his sorrel stallion, Goldy, up the trail to Tarantula.

Now he was here, studying the town. A mining road out of the canyon widened to become the main street, flanked by

false-fronted stores and honkytonks. A palmetto-bordered plaza identified a brick building which was probably a courthouse. Off to one side, a squat wooden steeple lifted above a willow grove, the town church.

Sun rays flashed on tombstones in the churchyard. Hatfield wondered if one of them bore the name of Karl Dunning. If he had been a victim of murder, as his widow believed, the killer's trail was eighteen years cold.

He muttered to his mount, firing his cigarette and picking up the reins, "We've come half a day's ride out of our way to put a flower on a stranger's grave, Goldy. But it'll be worth it, being able to write back to San Saba and let Mrs. Dunning know we located her man's grave."

As the Ranger put his sorrel down the ridge, he saw that Tarantula's Main Street was deserted, save for a few mongrel dogs ranging the gutters, and an occasional cowpony hitched to the tie-racks.

JIM HATFIELD

Anyone seeing Jim Hatfield ride in would never guess from his appearance that he was the most widely known Ranger in the Lone Star State, the man whom his own captain of Rangers long ago had dubbed the Lone Wolf because of some of his spectacular single-handed achievements.

He wore nothing to identify him as one of the most feared lawmen in the West. Habitually he carried his silver-ringed Ranger badge inside the lining of his left cowboot. His faded work shirt, bibless levis, stetson and boots were the accoutrements of an ordinary working cowhand.

At the foot of the ridge, a sign on a false-fronted shack roused Hatfield's interest.

TARANTULA WEEKLY TRIBUNE
Est. 1868
HAMP DOCKERY,
Editor & Publisher

Hatfield mused, That newspaper was in existence before Karl Dunning made his gold strike. The old files might shed some light on why Sheriff Jeffries thought Dunning was drunk when that horse bucked him off and killed him.

Dismounting in front of the *Tribune* office, Hatfield loomed taller than he appeared to be when in saddle—a black-haired, blue-eyed man who walked with the loose, stilted gait of a range rider.

He half-hitched Goldy's reins to a chewed cottonwood rail, snugged down the twin cedar-butted Colts holstered at his flanks, and made his way up the plank steps onto the awninged porch of the printshop. Through the doors, hooked open for ventilation, he could hear the rhythmic clank and grind of a flat-bed printing press.

Stooping to duck the six-foot lintel, Hatfield stepped inside, facing a cluttered

pine counter which shut off the alleys of type cases, a job press and other country newspaper machinery.

A girl, pretty blonde, wearing an eyeshade and a printer's ink-soiled apron, was gluing up pads of bill forms at the counter. She glanced up as the tall stranger entered and greeted him cheerily:

"A new subscriber, I hope!"

Hatfield removed his stetson, his nose wrinkling to the smell of molten glue which was bubbling in a pot on a small stove near the girl. He could dimly see a man feeding sheets of paper to the press at the far end of the shop.

"Not exactly, ma'am," he said, and smiled. "I wondered if your files go back as far as Eighteen-Seventy-one. And if I could see them."

The girl thrust a wisp of corn-yellow hair back from her temple. "Anyone's welcome to delve into the dusty archives, sir. Eighteen-Seventy-one coming right up."

Turning to a rack of shelves, the girl took down a large bound volume of age-yellowed newspapers labeled, VOL. IV—1871.

"That happens to be my birth year." The girl laughed. "I've always had a special affection for 'Seventy-one."

Hatfield said, "I wish I was looking up such a happy event. It so happens I'm hunting information about a friend of mine who died here in Tarantula during that year."

Unaccountably, the color suddenly fled from the girl's cheeks and Hatfield thought he saw her stiffen involuntarily.

"You were born here?" Hatfield asked, making idle conversation. "It's a nice town."

The girl forced a taut smile. "No. I've lived in Tarantula for only a year . . . Let me know if I can help you, sir."

The date of Karl Dunning's death being July fourth, Hatfield had no difficulty locating the story he wanted. It was on the back page of the *Tribune's* issue of July 11, 1871:

PROSPECTOR FOUND DEAD

Zeke Waymire, proprietor of the Aztec Saloon, made a gruesome discovery early Tuesday morning when he went into the alley back of his place and found a dead man.

A letter found on the unfortunate man who had been stabbed in the back identified him as Karl Dunning of San Saba, Texas, believed to have been a prospector recently returned from a trip into the Guadalupes. No clues to the perpetrator of the stabbing have been found.

Upon his return from El Paso Thursday Sheriff Holt Jeffries ordered the remains buried in the Tarantula churchyard instead of boot hill, since a Bible found on Dunning indicated a man of respectability. Jeffries is attempting to locate the deceased's kin in San Saba.

A sensation as of an icy wind cutting through him touched Jim Hatfield as he finished reading. Karl Dunning, as his wife had always believed, had not died accidentally. He had been murdered in a dark alley. Yet the sheriff had written the widow that Dunning had been bucked off a horse while drunk.

A perusal of following issues of the paper netted Hatfield no further information about Dunning. In those far-off times, murder had been commonplace, good for a one-paragraph obituary only.

Hatfield was closing the newspaper file when he heard the printing press shut down. Looking up, he saw the pressman coming his way, a squat man of forty-odd who wore a brush of square-cut brindle whiskers. A zigzag scar ran diagonally across his forehead from hairline to eyebrow.

SEEING him, Hatfield had a distinct impression that he had crossed this printer's trail before somewhere.

"Howdy," the man greeted Hatfield, halting at the counter. "I'm Hamp Dockery, editor of this rag. Ain't we met before?"

Instinct warned Hatfield to conceal his identity and the nature of his mission in Tarantula, "Couldn't say," he said, "but the name's Jim Field." He gave an alias he frequently used when working incognito on Ranger business. "I've never been in Tarantula before, if that's what you mean."

Dockery plucked a stub of pencil from behind one ear.

"Mind telling me the nature of your

business, Field? New items are hard to come by in a burg as small as Tarantula."

Hatfield glanced at the girl. She was staring at him as if in a trance, and a tremor was noticeable in her hands.

"Afraid you won't get much of a news item out of me, sir." Hatfield grinned. "I'm just a saddle bum heading for New Mexico on cattle business . . . Who's the sheriff hereabouts?"

Dockery's shoe-button eyes narrowed. "We ain't had a sheriff in Tarantula since the county seat moved to Van Horn. Local law is a marshal name of J. C. Shafter. If—if you got business with the sheriff, Field, that sounds like news."

Hatfield shook his head. "No. Just wondered whatever became of Holt Jeffries."

Dockery's jaw stiffened under the spade beard.

"Jeffries hung up his guns years back," he said, and without further comment turned on his heel and stalked back to his printing press.

Hatfield turned to the girl, oddly puzzled by the tension she was trying so hard to conceal. He drawled, "Your father's real close-mouthed, ain't he? Didn't even say if Jeffries was alive or dead."

She said in a half-whisper, "Mr. Dockery's not my father. I just work for him. I'm—Jill Mitchell. But I can tell you this—Holt Jeffries still lives in Tarantula. He hasn't been a sheriff since he discovered a gold mine in Placentia Canyon."

Jim Hatfield felt his heart jump. "Jeffries discovered gold in the Guadalupes? When?"

"In 'Seventy-two," Jill said. "He calls it the Seventy-two Mine."

Hatfield reached for his stetson. "I'm much obliged, Miss Mitchell," he said. "*Hasta la vista.*"

Leaving the print shop, Hatfield's brain was in turmoil. Holt Jeffries, the man who had lied about Dunning's death, had struck gold the year following the old prospector's murder.

He was untying Goldy's bridle reins when he heard steps crossing the board walk. When he turned, Jill Mitchell was at his side. And there was no mistaking the wild fear in her eyes now.

"You—you were reading the account of Karl Dunning's death," she whispered. "Why? Did you know him?"

"No. But I knew his widow over in San Saba. I promised her if I was ever in Tarantula I would visit his grave."

Something like relief showed in Jill Michell's eyes.

"Oh, you won't have any trouble locating it. It's in the southeast corner of the churchyard, with an angel on the tombstone."

Hatfield said gravely, "Something's bothering you, Miss Mitchell. Something in connection with Karl Dunning. I'd like to know—"

Jill Mitchell choked, "No—please!" and before Hatfield could grab her arm, she had swung away and was hurrying back into the newspaper office.

Hatfield thought, Young lady, we'll meet again—soon.

He was riding away from the *Tribune* office when he caught a glimpse of Ham Dockery ducking out the rear of his print shop. He disappeared behind an adjacent blacksmith shop.

And Hatfield thought again, If I haven't seen that scar-faced grouch before he sure puts me in mind of somebody like him.

Midway down the block, Hatfield dismounted before a squat adobe building bearing a sign:

OVERLAND TELEGRAPH

Inside, he composed a message in code which his Ranger chief in Austin, Captain William McDowell, would translate to read:

DELAYED GETTING TO EL PASO ON IMPORTANT MATTER HERE IN TARANTULA. WILL REPORT BY LETTER LATER. HAVE HOPES OF UNCOVERING AN EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD MURDER.

AFTER paying the mystified operator, Hatfield rode on down Main Street in the direction of the church which he had just seen from the ridge overlooking Tarantula. En route, he passed another building which roused his interest—the

Aztec Saloon. It had been the owner of that establishment who had discovered Karl Dunning's dead body behind the building.

The church, badly in need of paint and a new roof, was on the extreme southwestern edge of town. Knee-high weeds made a tangled jungle of the burial ground. Tilted tombstones and a few weathered wooden crosses showed their tops here and there, in staggered rows.

Leaving Goldy ground-hitched outside the rusty wrought-iron gate, the Ranger made his way inside the fenced churchyard. Hat in hand, he approached the far corner where Jill Mitchell had said he would find Karl Dunning's resting place.

He had no difficulty spotting a tombstone carved into the shape of a winged angel, hands clasped and head bowed in an attitude of prayer. It was easily the most pretentious marker in the graveyard. Dunning's widow had pinched pennies to have this monument carved and shipped out West. The epitaph was cut deep into the polished Vermont granite:

KARL DUNNING
1831—1871
R.I.P.

For a long moment, Jim Hatfield stood reverently, looking down at the weed-grown oblong of adobe. This grave held a secret which might never be solved. The trail of Dunning's murder was too cold to retrace, yet Hatfield knew he would not hit the trail to El Paso until he had at least made an effort to turn back the pages of the past and read the story they told.

He had knelt down to set an overturned flower urn at the foot of the grave upright when he felt the air-whip of a bullet against his cheek. One of the angle's granite wings disintegrated in a flurry of chips.

Instinctively Hatfield flung himself belly-down in the dead grass, even as the whining of the slug's ricochet blended with the deafening crash of a gunshot somewhere across the cemetery behind him.

Clawing a .45 from holster, he twisted around. But he saw only the vaguest blur of movement as a figure, undistinguishable against the glare of the sun, disappeared around the corner of the unpainted church.

Hatfield's gunsights held for an instant on a smudge of powdersmoke lingering under a weeping willow tree, marking the spot where the gunman had stood to take bushwhack aim. Hatfield knew he owed his life to that chance stooping down movement he had made. He knew also that in the next few moments his attacker might reappear for a second try. He, too, was marked for murder in Tarantula.

Holding his fire, Jim Hatfield waited.

CHAPTER II

"I'm Ex-Sheriff Jeffries"

TO JIM HATFIELD'S ears came the muted sound of boots slogging over hard ground, behind the church. Gun palmed, the Ranger came to his feet and, crouched low, ran hard along a row of graves toward the front fence.

He dropped into a crouch behind a time-weathered tombstone and thumbed his Colt to full cock, as he caught sight of Goldy hitched to the iron gate. He could tell by the sudden uplift and swing of the sorrel's head that the horse had spotted the gunman passing the front of the church, headed Hatfield's way.

The next instant Hatfield saw a man's head and shoulders jut around the corner of the built-on vestibule at the entrance. The sun was in Hatfield's eyes, but he caught the glint of light on gun metal, and knew that the ambusher, whoever he might be, was searching the weed-grown graveyard for a glimpse of his target.

Leveling his gun-barrel, his arm braced against the tombstone, Hatfield squeezed off his shot. He knew he had missed when the man ducked out of sight, and his ears caught the solid thud of his bullet striking the clapboards of the church vestibule.

Taking a long chance, Jim Hatfield left the shelter of the tombstone and raced in a bee-line toward the church. Goldy's head was swung around in the direction of downtown, telling the Ranger that his adversary was beating a retreat, having failed in his initial bushwhack attempt.

Then Hatfield was at the corner of the vestibule, staring at the splintered groove his slug had chewed from the wooden trim of the wall corner. The soil at the foot of the building was hard-packed adobe, showing no trace of footprints.

Crouched low, Hatfield peered around the corner. No one was in sight, but sunlight distinctly revealed the fresh-stirred dust leading through a side gate of the church fence to the concealment of buildings beyond.

The two gunshots, however, had roused the town out of its siesta lethargy. Men were emerging from the buildings across Main, ranging themselves along porch railings as they stared curiously up and down the street to trace the source of the shots.

Holstering his gun, Jim Hatfield stalked out to the iron gateway and mounted. He doubted if his attacker would attempt to gun him down in full view of the town. But he realized that the eyes which had peered down gun sights at him from the shelter of the willow tree were probably keeping him in view now as he put his horse down the street.

A shudder rippled down Hatfield's back, a reaction from his narrow escape. He thought once more, If I hadn't stooped down when I did, that slug would have caught me between the shoulders.

But why would anyone attempt to ambush a stranger paying an innocent visit to a churchyard? Perhaps, Hatfield reasoned, that hombre figured I was prying into secrets better left dead.

The Ranger turned his attention now to the Aztec Saloon. Under the house name on the false front was a line which read:

Ezekiel Waymire, Proprietor
Est. 1866

Waymire, thought Hatfield. The man who discovered Dunning dead.

Curious eyes followed the strange rider as he reined in toward the Aztec. Hatfield's brain was photographing every detail here. The narrow gut of an alley separated the Aztec from a newer building alongside it, built of brick with two plate glass windows and an expensive wrought-bronze door showing a bas-relief of a prospector panning for gold. A sign over the door identified the building as the main office of the Seventy-two Mining Company, of which Holt Jeffries was president.

Dismounting at a rack in front of the Aztec, Hatfield's glance ranged along the loafers seated on benches on either side of the batwing doors. They were regarding him with the reserved interest they would show any stranger in Tarantula. But they had not been here when he had ridden past, on his way to the churchyard. The gunfire had brought them out-of-doors.

HATFIELD already had decided that the Aztec was the logical place to begin an inquiry into Karl Dunning's murder. The prospector's body had been discovered behind the saloon. It was almost too much to hope for, but if the same Zeke Waymire was still running the place, he might be a valuable source of information.

Hatfield was rounding the end of the hitch-rack, adjusting his cross-hung shell belts more comfortably on his flanks when the bronze door of the Seventy-two Mining Company office opened. A tall man in a black topcoat and a beaver top hat stepped out and looked up and down the street.

Holt Jeffries, most likely, the man who had been sheriff at the time of Dunning's death. Jill Mitchell had said Holt Jeffries was the most important citizen in Tarantula now, and this man had a look of affluence and authority, both in the imperious way he held himself and in the way he dressed. Wealth and power almost spoke aloud in the tailored cut of his fustian topcoat, in the ornate bed-of-flowers waistcoat across which a gold-nugget watch chain was looped. There was an

indication of the fop, in the sharp crease of the marseilles trousers tucked into highly polished Hussar boots.

The man glanced up and down the street, giving Jim Hatfield only a passing glance. He was in his early fifties, with a thick mane of graying hair combed back over his ears, the same gray as his dragoon mustache and Colonel Cody goatee.

"Thought I heard gunshots," he said to no one in particular.

One of the bench-warmers on the Aztec porch cleared his throat and called in a deferential tone:

"Reckon you did, Mr. Jeffries. Couple of 'em."

Jeffries acknowledged the information with a curt nod, not deigning to glance in the saloon loafer's direction. But at that moment he did appear to notice Jim Hatfield for the first time, and his eyes narrowed with sudden interest as he spotted the low-slung Colts at the stranger's hips.

On Hatfield's lips was a taut smile as Jeffries crossed the plank sidewalk and halted in front of him, hands thumb-hooked under the armpits.

"Did you happen to hear those shots just now, stranger?" Jeffries demanded.

Hatfield nodded. "One of 'em," he said candidly, "was fired by me. The other one, the first one, was fired *at* me."

Jeffries' brows arched. His eyes drilled into Hatfield's. You're trying to say someone in Tarantula took a shot at you, young man? Where did this happen?"

Hatfield shrugged. "I was paying a visit to a grave over behind the church. Seems as if the graveyard is out of bounds to riders passing through, Mr. Jeffries!"

Jeffries curled a finger through one wing of his mustache.

"You know my name?"

"You're Holt Jeffries, aren't you? One-time sheriff of the county?"

The man who now was a mine owner, nodded. "I'm Jeffries, former sheriff. And who might you be?"

"Like I said, a rider passing through."

The scowl deepened between Jeffries' brows. "You say you were visiting a grave? Whose grave?"

Hatfield hesitated. "The grave of an old friend. Does it matter? The thing that gets under my hide is that I came within an ace of stopping a bullet."

Holt Jeffries pulled in a heavy breath. His eyes left their piercing scrutiny of the young rider, lifting to gaze across the street beyond the hitch-rack. Suddenly he lifted a hand, beckoning, and called:

"J. C., come over here. I want to see you."

GLANCING behind him, Hatfield saw a lanky man detach himself from the shade of a gambling house across the street and headed across the wide street, his boots kicking up puffs of silvery dust from the wheel-rutted earth. Pinned to the man's gallus strap was a six-pointed silver star.

Coming over to join them, Hatfield decided, was Tarantula's keeper of the peace, Marshal J. C. Shafter.

When Shafter reached the edge of the walk where Hatfield and Jeffries stood facing each other, the mine owner asked gravely, "Didn't you hear those gunshots, J.C.—or are you getting too old to take an interest in such things?"

J.C. Shafter reached up to buff his law badge with a horny palm. He was a lantern-jawed man with a red mustache, a balding head, and deep-set eyes. They looked shifty and uneasy as he avoided Jeffries' glare.

"I heard 'em, Holt," the marshal admitted reluctantly. "I was shooting pool in the back room at Harry's. I'd just come out to investigate when you hollered to me."

Holt Jeffries reached under the lapel of his coat and drew out a silver cigar case, from which he selected a black cheroot, bit off the end and thrust it in his mouth.

Hatfield said irritably, "Marshal, somebody took a pot shot at me, down by the church. What kind of a town are you running?"

Shafter's eyes swung around toward Hatfield. "Stranger in town, ain't you?"

he demanded surlily.

As Hatfield nodded, Holt Jeffries said in a soft voice, "Getting a mite careless with your law enforcement, aren't you, J.C.? Don't you notice anything unusual about this man?"

Shafter's hand dropped to his side. The next instant, Jim Hatfield was looking into the black bore of the marshal's six-gun.

"You're under arrest, stranger," Shafter said bluntly.

"Just a minute, you two," said Hatfield. "I've got some questions to ask. . . ."

A knot of muscle hardened at the corners of Hatfield's jaw.

"For what? Getting myself shot at?"

Shafter growled, "Which way'd you come in? From the south?"

"From the south, yes."

"Over the ridge?"

"Yes."

Shafter spat into the dust. "Then you couldn't have missed the sign I tacked up alongside the trail. It's agin the law to tote firearms here in Tarantula."

Hatfield matched Shafter's cold grin. "Not for riders just sloping through town, it ain't. Your own sign said so."

Jeffries stepped down off the high wooden curb and reached out with both arms to snatch Hatfield's matched Colts from holsters. He jacked open the guns, ejected the cartridges, tossed the shells over his shoulder and handed the unloaded weapons to J.C. Shafter, who packed them into a pocket of his faded butternut jumper.

"Passing through town," the marshal explained, "means just that. If you light from saddle, first thing you're supposed to do is check your guns. You didn't."

Hatfield shrugged helplessly. This was obviously a put-up job, a technicality intended to take into custody a man who had shown an unhealthy interest in the grave of one Karl Dunning.

"*'Sta bueno,*" the Ranger said. "How much bail do you want to get your hands onto? I'm wise to the way you jerkwater marshals operate, enforcing your ordinances on strangers."

Shafter glanced at Jeffries, who said quietly, "Toting firearms is a serious of-

fense in Tarantula, cowboy. It was a rule put into effect when I was sheriff, and it's played a big part in keeping law and order here. Your offense isn't bailable under the law."

"Meaning I got to go to jail?"

Jeffries nodded, "Until the circuit judge shows up to hold your trial, yes. That could be a week or it could be a month.

A CROWD was beginning to gather, the smell of excitement spreading fast through the town, drawing men from saloons and stores on both sides of the street. Glancing around, Hatfield recognized Hamp Dockery, the editor of the *Tribune*. Sweat beads glistened on the man's zigzag scar.

"You've got yourself a news item after all, Dockery!" Hatfield snapped. He turned back to Shafter. "All right, lead the way to the bastille. You hold all the aces."

Shafter, finding himself the center of attention, swelled up like a pouter pigeon. He gestured with his gun in the direction of the courthouse plaza.

"Jail's down thataway . . . Break it up, you hombres. Let us through."

Hatfield glanced around. Holt Jeffries was just disappearing inside his office. Hamp Dockery was scribbling like mad on a sheaf of copy paper.

"How about my horse?" Hatfield demanded, as Shafter poked him in the back with his Colt and herded him across the street.

"Your bronc will be took care of, stranger. Stable fees will be part of the fine Judge Burwinder'll be assessing you."

Reaching the courthouse square, Shafter directed his prisoner toward one wing of the boarded-up building. Iron-barred windows indicated the calaboose.

In the marshal's office, out of view of the curious stares of the populace, Hatfield decided to display his Ranger star and other official credentials which he carried in a money belt under his shirt. He had to put an end to this trumped-up charge. Shafter would think twice before putting a Texas Ranger behind bars.

Crossing the weed-grown courthouse-yard, Shafter led the way to a side door marked:

CITY JAIL—MARSHAL'S OFFICE

"Now about that gunplay," Shafter drawled, inserting a key in the lock. "You say somebody took a shot at you?"

Hatfield nodded, climbing the jail steps and entering a dimly-lighted office. "With intent to kill, Marshal. Now look. This play has gone far enough. I'm—"

He was just turning to face the lawman who was crossing the threshold behind him when the blow came. He felt the jarring impact of gun steel grazing his temple, had the briefest glimpse of J. C. Shafter's swart face bending over him, gun lifted for another clubbing blow.

Hatfield was vaguely aware of hitting the floor of the office. Then a second explosion made a flashing red light in his brain and his senses snuffed out, giving way to a blank void of oblivion.

CHAPTER III

Ranger's Badge

SLOWLY Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf, in very truth now, in this forsaken town of Tarantula, dragged himself from a black slough of insensibility. Consciousness returned by infinitely slow degrees. When he finally opened his eyes it was to find that he was laying full length on a narrow, rawhide-sprung cot.

Through an iron-barred window overhead he could see stars glimmering in a black night sky. Vagrant sounds reached him—the ticking of a clock, the tinpanny pound of a piano somewhere in the distance, the sough of the night wind in trees.

He swung his legs off the cot and sat up, dizzy and nauseated. When he reached up to feel twin knots on his skull, his fingers came away sticky.

After an indefinite interval of time the recurrent waves of sickness left his stomach. He groped in his shirt pocket for a

block of California matches and struck one aflame, to get his bearings.

He was in a six-by-six jail cell, a corner cell with two walls of brick, the other two of strap-iron latticework. The only furnishings in the cell were the cot, with a moldy blue army blanket rolled up at the pillow end, and a shelf with a stub of candle protruding from a nail stuck in the wood.

He lit the candle and resumed his seat on the cot, massaging his sore skull. Finally, as his thoughts became coherent again, he unbuttoned his shirt and took off his canvas money-belt.

One compartment still held the greenbacks he had carried as expense money on his journey toward El Paso. But the other compartment, in which he kept his Ranger credentials, was empty.

Hatfield reached down to pry a finger under his left Coffeyville boot, exploring the pocket in the lining. His circle-enclose Ranger star likewise was missing. Further search revealed that Shafter had taken his cartridge belts as well as his tobacco and cigarette papers. The jackknife and change in his chaps pockets were gone. He had been thoroughly searched.

By now, then, he thought, that marshal knows he conked a Texas Ranger. Maybe that's bad. Maybe Tarantula don't cotton to Rangers snooping around.

He climbed up on the cot to have a look out the window. Beyond the plaza he could see the star-pointed lights of saloon windows along Main Street. The church steeple was sharply etched against the western sky which was still tinged with the glow of sunset. Off across town a clock chimed. Nine o'clock. At this season of the year, sundown was around eight. As near as he could judge, Shafter had knocked him out around three. He had been unconscious six hours.

Somewhere close at hand, inside the jail, a door opened and closed. Hatfield heard the scrape of boots, the scratch of a match, then saw lamplight shining through the big keyhole of the bullpen door.

He was climbing down off the cot when the door opened and Marshal Shafter stepped into the cell block, the bail of a lantern hanging over one arm. Stopping in front of Hatfield's cell, the lawman held up his lamp to peer through the latticework.

"Rallied around, eh, Hatfield?" Shafter said with something like relief. "Been worried about you. Our only doc's out of town, treating a broken-legged miner up at the Seventy-two, or I'd of fetched him around to bring you to quicker."

Hatfield grinned crookedly, seeing the marshal sorting through a ring of keys to unlock his cell.

"I sure owe you an apology, Hatfield," Shafter said. "Why in hell didn't you tell me and Jeffries you was a Ranger, when we braced you there in front of the mine office?"

"Would that of kept you from bashing me on the noggin, Marshal—my being a Ranger?"

SHAFTER swung the cell door open. Without meeting the prisoner's eyes he said petulantly, "You shouldn't of done it, Hatfield. Warn't no cause to do what you done."

Hatfield folded his arms. "And just what did I do?" he asked with heavy sarcasm.

Shafter set his lantern on the floor and hooked thumbs in shell belts. "Why, trying to jump me like you did, to get my gun away from me just as we were coming into the front office. I didn't know you were a Ranger. So I belted you a couple licks."

Hatfield grunted sardonically. "So I tried to jump you. Is that what you've told the town, Shafter? So you belted me."

Shafter reached in his pocket and drew out a heavy official-looking brown envelope. He reached forward gingerly to hand the envelope to Hatfield.

"Your Ranger papers and badge, Hatfield. Took 'em off'n you while you were laid out cold. That's how I found out you were a Ranger. I dunno how Hamp Dock-

ery knew it."

Hatfield stopped ripping open the envelope holding his property and looked up. "That newspaper editor knew who I was?"

Shafter nodded. "Reckon he did. First thing he said when he come over to the jail office, right after I'd laid you out in this cell, was what I'd done with the Lone Wolf, and could he interview you for his paper."

Cold shock flowed through Jim Hatfield. In no way had he revealed his identity to Jill Mitchell or the *Tribune* editor during his brief visit in the newspaper office this afternoon. Yet Hamp Dockery had spotted him. He *had* met Dockery before, then.

And Hamp Dockery had ducked out of the *Tribune* building, just as Hatfield was leaving. Could it have been Dockery who had trailed him to the churchyard, taken a shot at him?

"That's what comes from being one of the most famous men in Texas, I reckon," Shafter went on. "Goes without saying, I'm plumb sorry I manhandled you like I done. But you jumped me."

Hatfield pinned on his badge, restored his papers to his money-belt. There was no further need of anonymity now. He was no longer incognito here in Tarantula.

"Well," he said, "if it's all the same with you, Marshal, I'm getting out of this dungeon. Where's my horse?"

Shafter backed off a step, shaking his head.

"Not so fast, Hatfield. I can't turn you loose, not now that the town knows I arrested you for breaking the law. Law says I got to hold you for trial. If'n I let you go, I'd have trouble with the next miner or cowhand who got nabbed for not checking his hardware when he got to town."

Anger made a choking sensation in Hatfield's throat.

"Look, Marshal. Within an hour after I rode into your town, somebody took a shot at me. I aim to find out who did that, and why. I can't do it, sitting around waiting for a circuit judge to show up and release me."

Shafter grinned conspiratorially. "Now cool down, Hatfield. I'm a-coming around to that. I'm going to cut all that red tape, but it's got to be done right, for my own protection!"

"Meaning what?"

Shafter said, "Because I know you're a Ranger, I'm going to leave this cell unlocked, savvy? And the back door to the bullpen here will be unlocked. Any time you want, you can slip out of jail, pick up your stallion at the stable around in back of the courthouse, and be on your way. I won't know anything about it until I come on duty tomorrow morning."

HATFIELD rubbed his sore skull gingerly, thinking over Shafter's proposition. Something wrong here; the arrangement was too contrived, too farfetched. A jail-break would not reflect to this marshal's credit, when the news got out tomorrow.

"Now look," Shafter went on. "I got a tray of grub out in the front office—figured you'd be hungry. Take your time about eatin'. Ten o'clock, I lock up for the night, no jailer on duty. When I come back to the office tomorrow, you'll be long gone. It's as simple as that. You savvy?"

Hatfield nodded slowly. "I savvy. And I'm obliged to you for cutting the red tape, Shafter."

Something like relief showed on the marshal's bony face. He went back into the jail office, leaving the cell door open, and returned with a tray covered with a napkin.

"Don't make your break before ten, now," he cautioned. "Just in case anybody drops around for a chat before I lock up. You'll hear me leave. Any time after that you're on your own."

"*'Sta bueno,* Marshal."

Hatfield attacked his meal with relish, the hot coffee feeling good in his belly. Shafter had made no mention of returning his guns, but that was no doubt part of the scheme. An escaping prisoner would hardly be able to break into the front office and open the gun locker.

He could hear Shafter moving around in the front office, rustling papers, rattling a

stove lid. By the time the town clock struck nine-thirty, Hatfield had finished eating. The throbbing pain in his skull was easing now; his fingers were no longer shaking.

When he heard the town clock chime the three-quarter hour, fifteen minutes before Shafter was scheduled to lock up for the night, Hatfield stepped out of his cell and tested the door of the bullpen. It opened, and he stepped into the lamp-lighted glare of the jail office.

J. C. Shafter, working on some papers at his littered rolltop desk, looked up, startled.

"You ain't supposed to come in here!" he said in a hoarse whisper, shooting a guilty look at the shuttered window. "Too risky. Somebody might drop in."

Hatfield said grimly, "I came for my gun harness, Marshal."

Shafter swung around in his swivel chair, licking his lips. "I can't do that, Hatfield!" he whined. "You ain't supposed to be able to get into the front office. I'll have enough to explain to the town as it is, losing a prisoner and all."

Shafter's eyes betrayed him now. They were fixed on a half-opened drawer beside him. Reaching down, Hatfield jerked open the drawer, revealing his coiled shell belts and holstered .45s. Another sixgun was in the drawer, the lamplight shining on the lead tips of cartridges nested in the chambers. And because Hatfield knew Jeffries had unloaded his own weapons, it was the third Colt he yanked out of the drawer.

Shafter was reaching for his own .45, half risen out of his chair, when Jim Hatfield motioned him back with the cocked gun.

"You're going to answer some questions, Marshal!" he bit out. "Maybe I'd better take your hardware first."

Beads of sweat burst from the marshal's pores as Hatfield reached down to lift the man's Colt from holster and toss it into a sand box on which the office pot-belly stove squatted.

"Questions?" the marshal quavered. "What you mean?"

"How long has Hamp Dockery lived in Tarantula?"

Shafter scrubbed his pallid face with a bandanna. "Well, he started the *Tribune* —that was back in 'Sixty-eight, I think. I only been here eight-nine years. He was here when I come."

"How did he know I was a Ranger? I didn't show my star."

"I didn't ask him," Shafter whined. "But you're well-known in Texas, Hatfield. I've heard of you as often as I've heard of Sam Houston, almost."

THE RANGER said after a pause, "Who's the young lady who works for Dockery at the newspaper office?"

"Jill Mitchell? She come here a year or so back, said she was meaning to be a newspaper woman, and wanted a job on a country weekly to learn the game from the ground up. Dockery needed a woman to write up the gossip, so he hired her."

Hatfield thought, A girl who almost fainted when she got wise that I was investigating Karl Dunning's death notice.

Slowly and deliberately, Hatfield reloaded his own guns and buckled his cartridge harness around his waist. Then he glanced at the wall clock and said gruffly, "Five to ten, Shafter. Let's go."

The marshal came unsteadily to his feet. "Use your head, Hatfield! I can't be seen leaving the jail with you. We might be seen—I'd lose my job. As one lawman to another, you can understand that, can't you?"

Hatfield said quietly, "We'll leave by the back door, Shafter."

The Lone Wolf knew from the violent shock that contorted Shafter's face that the "jail break" had been a hoax, that Shaftre had never intended for his prisoner to escape with his life.

Shafter made an inarticulate choking sound deep in his throat as Hatfield seized him by the arm and shoved him through the bullpen door.

"No, Hatfield," he protested desperately. "Not the back way! We'll be spotted from the street, the two of us! The town'll know I turned you loose!"

Hatfield yanked open the rear exit of the bullpen. His sixgun reamed into the soft flesh between Shafter's shoulders.

"You're leading me to the barn where you stabled my horse, that's all. Get moving."

Shafter reared back at the threshold, but Hatfield's forward push sent him reeling down the steps. From the darkness of the bullpen the Ranger heard Shafter choke out, "No, Harkness!" and the night rocked to the deafening explosion of a gunshot. Hatfield had a pinched-off glimpse of a bore-flash in the deep shadows at the far corner of the courthouse.

He heard the impact of the bullet striking the marshal, saw J. C. Shafter pitch headlong into the dirt at the foot of the steps, blood gushing from a bullet-pierced neck. Jerking his gaze off the dead man, Jim Hatfield peered around the edge of the door, focusing his eyes on the shadows where the gunhawk had been waiting, ready to fire on whoever stepped out of the back door of the jail.

Faintly to the Ranger's ears came the sound of racing boots, worn by somebody out of sight beyond the courthouse. A man named Harkness, that was all he knew. A killer Shafter had planted there to gun down an "escaping prisoner."

"You made it sound too easy, Shafter," Hatfield whispered at the dead man. "Harkness thinks he killed a Ranger."

CHAPTER IV

Waymire's Story

FOR five minutes Jim Hatfield waited inside the cell block doorway, waiting to see if the gunshot would draw anyone to the courthouse plaza. When nothing happened, he eased himself out the doorway and, holstering his gun, bent down to hoist Shafter's body over his shoulder.

Carrying the dead man along the courthouse wall, Hatfield's nostrils picked up the lingering, acrid scent of gunpowder at the clump of shrubbery near the corner of the building. He realized that Shafter had been only an unidentifiable silhouette against the jail lights, coming through that door. The mysterious Harkness, whoever he was, had had orders to shoot down anyone coming out the bullpen door and that he had done, and made a quick retreat from the scene.

Rounding the rear of the courthouse, Hatfield made out the loom of a barn at the far side of the plaza. The stars were obscured by an overcast, so he felt safe in crossing the open ground to the barn with his grisly burden.

He could feel no guilt for his part in the marshal's violent death. If Shafter had not himself engineered the scheme to murder a Ranger, he had been a part of the plot, and a key part.

Entering the coal-black barn, Hatfield heard Goldy whicker in recognition from an invisible row of stalls. The Ranger lowered the marshal to the manure-dusted floor of the barn and scratched a match, blowing it out as soon as he had located the stalls. Goldy was in the one at the far end.

A strawberry roan mare, Shafter's personal mount most likely, was stabled in the first stall. Hatfield carried the dead man down to the third stall, remembering that it was empty, and unceremoniously dumped his burden into the manger. He located a pitchfork in the darkness and went around to the runway where hay was stacked, forking a plentiful quantity into the manger to cover Shafter's body.

Someone surely would be coming to investigate the shooting in the vicinity of the jail, providing Shafter had not been alone in the plot to kill a Ranger for himself tonight. Hatfield had to set the stage to account for the missing man.

Hurrying back to the jail, he stepped into the deserted office, found a scratch pad, and scribbled a hand-printed note to disguise his handwriting:

HAVE GONE UP PLACENTIA CANYON TO THE 72 MINE. BE BACK DAY AFTER TOMORROW.

J. C. SHAFTER

Picking up a ring of keys from the desk he made sure the front door of the office was locked, then returned to the rear exit of the bullpen, making no move to close his own cell door. Closing and locking the back door behind him, he took a horseshoe nail from his pocket and, using the backstrap of a sixgun stock for a hammer, tacked the note to the panels.

That done, he made his way to the courthouse wall. He was remembering that the building was perched on foundation timbers leaving a two-foot space between the floor joists and the ground. That would give him just the hiding place he wanted. So he crawled under the courthouse and made himself as comfortable as possible.

Concealed in the blackness here, he had a good view of the spot where Shafter had been shot down. He would be able to see anyone who showed up, without risking discovery himself.

Long trained in taking cat-naps on the trail, the Lone Wolf permitted himself to take snatches of much-needed sleep, knowing the slightest sound would rouse him. But the long hours of the night passed, and the gray light of another dawn was filling Tarantula's hill-pocketed flats before the hidden Ranger saw someone enter the plaza, headed toward the jail office.

A JACKLEG mucker from the upcountry mines, to judge from double-breasted blue shirt, mud-smeared levis, and high laced boots the man wore. Hardly the garb of a cowpuncher or a townsman. He was in his early forties, stubble-jawed and swarthy. He wore twin guns and packed a mean-looking bowie in a belt scabbard.

As the man neared the jail it was obvious that he was on a definite errand. Less than twenty feet from Hatfield's lookout post he veered, and headed straight toward the corner formed by the jail wing. His eyes were sweeping the ground there, as if searching for something he expected to find but couldn't locate.

Hatfield grinned to himself. He thought, That could be Señor Harkness, dead sure he dropped his target last night, and wondering what's become of the body.

The miner halted at the foot of the steps, staring at the small puddle of congealed blood which stained the dirt where Shafter had dropped. Then, glancing wildly about, he spotted the gleam of white paper tacked outside on the back door of the bullpen.

Hatfield remained motionless between the timbered underpinnings of the courthouse, as the miner climbed the steps to read the printed note. Turning quickly then, the man broke into a run, heading back toward the break in the adobe wall of the plaza from which he had come.

Jim Hatfield had to curb a strong impulse to crawl out of hiding and throw a gun on the man. But if the early-morning visitor was Harkness, it would be more important to see what the killer's next move would be than to show his

A TALL TEXAS TALE

PHONY FISH

A BEWHISKERED old Texas prospector edged slowly along the busy bar of the mining town hot spot, squinting intently at the bear and lion heads, wildcats, and fish mounted as decorations above the big mirror.

Finally, his eyes focused upon a stuffed tarpon, stretched in gigantic grandeur above all the other game and fish.

The old fellow looked at it for several moments, mumbling and shaking his head. Then he turned to the crowd and announced, "If the feller who caught this thing is present, I'll call him a liar to his face."

—*Jack Kytle*

hand prematurely.

Not until the miner had vanished through the plaza gate did Jim Hatfield crawl out of his dusty covert and head in pursuit. When he reached the adobe wall, flanking Main Street, he was in time to see the blue-shirted man sprinting in a beeline for the brick office of the Seventy-two Mining Company.

Jeffries' headquarters, Hatfield thought. It makes sense. Jeffries railroaded me into the calaboose yesterday, Jeffries must have told Shafter to get me killed trying to break jail. Now Jeffries is wondering why his marshal didn't show up last night to report.

Dusting himself off, Jim Hatfield strolled at a leisurely pace across the street, grinning as he visualized Holt Jeffries' consternation when the miner reported that the corpse was missing. Even more inexplicable would be Shafter's note, saying that he was heading into the Guadalupes, bound for Jeffries' mine. What reason would the town marshal have for such an errand—unless Shafter had gone out on a burying chore, was hiding the body of a murdered Ranger?

Hatfield chuckled, thinking, "It balls up somebody's careful planning, anyway." Shafter was supposed to have shot me, an escaping prisoner, to account for what happened to the hombre who violated his no-gun-toting rule. Nobody would know the dead man was a Texas Ranger—except Hamp Dockery, and Shafter, and maybe Jeffries.

Entering a Chinese restaurant he had noticed on his arrival in town yesterday, Hatfield took a table near the street window, from which he could keep an eye on Jeffries' mine office. The Oriental who emerged from the kitchen to take his order apparently spoke no English, and offered a greasy menu card. From it the Ranger ordered two portions of the biggest breakfast listed.

He was half through his much-needed meal when he saw Holt Jeffries, immaculately dressed even at this early hour, emerge from the Seventy-two office with the blue-shirted miner whom Hatfield was calling "Harkness" in his mind.

THE two men must have done all their talking inside, for the miner went straight to a saddle horse at the tierack, mounted, and with a wave to Holt Jeffries set off up Main Street in the direction of the canyon mouth. In moments he vanished up the canyon road at a full gallop.

Thinks he's taking after Marshal Shafter, Hatfield commented to himself as he watched Holt Jeffries go back inside his office. So far, so good. I wish I could have planted the marshal in a little safer place.

His leisurely breakfast finished, Jim Hatfield went back to the street. The sun was just lifting over the eastern ridge above the town, and cookfires were beginning to send up smoke from scattered houses in the residential section beyond Main. There was a taut feeling in Hatfield's muscles. It was not too pleasant a sensation, knowing he was marked for death in this town. But he walked now with his Ranger badge in plain sight, and with the inner knowledge that beyond any doubt the cold trail he had been following had suddenly become a hot one which *might* lead to the solution of Karl Dunning's murder! And the logical spot, as he had decided before, to begin his search was Zeke Waymire's Aztec saloon, where Dunning had met his end.

A stooped, elderly swamper was on the porch when Hatfield arrived, sweeping out the discarded playing cards, cigarette stubs, and other trash left in the place the night before. The old man's eyes focused on Hatfield as the tall Ranger mounted the Aztec's front porch steps.

"Morning," the swamper greeted. "Best part of the day, morning. Tarantula don't look so damned ugly by sunrise."

Hatfield nodded. "I was wondering," he said, "if Zeke Waymire still runs this establishment."

The swamper's rheumy gaze was fixed on Hatfield's star now. Finally he nodded.

"I'm Zeke Waymire. If I live till next spring it'll make forty years I been in this town. It was a Injun watering hole

and nothin' else when I come here, long before the Civil War."

A rush of relief went through Jim Hatfield as he reached out to grip Waymire's hand. "I'm Jim Hatfield," he said. "I'd like to have a pow-wow with you, Zeke."

Waymire leaned his broom against the clapboard wall.

"Not the Lone Wolf Ranger?" he asked, doubtfully.

"I've been called that."

Waymire twisted an arthritic finger through his tobacco-stained mustache. "You want a pow-wow with me? On official business, or just sociable?"

Hatfield smiled.

"Both, my friend. Could we do our talking inside?"

Waymire headed for the batwings without comment and Hatfield followed him into the deserted barroom. Waymire hauled a couple of chairs out from under a baize-covered poker table.

"Set down," he invited, making himself comfortable in a rickety Douglas chair. "Always glad to accommodate the law. But there ain't been anything happen in Tarantula that a Ranger would want to investigate. Got to hand it to the law for keeping order in these parts, not allowing any gun-toting." Waymire leaned forward. "I seen you getting marched off to the pokey yesterday for gun-toting. Reckon Shafter didn't know he was arresting a Ranger. You wasn't sporting a star yesterday."

Hatfield said, "I'll explain that a little later. Just how good's your memory, amigo?"

Waymire shrugged. "Tol'able. Try me. How far back?"

"The summer of 'Seventy-one. Ever hear of a desert rat by the name of Dunning?"

The old man stiffened. "Karl Dunning? Reckon so. Put flowers on his grave ever' Memorial Day, seeing as how his kinfolks never showed up. Fact is, I set up his tombstone, after his widder had it shipped out from Vermont. Been intending to write her about that but never got around to it in eighteen year."

HATFIELD'S heart was pumping rapidly. "Maybe you remember how Dunning died. I know his widow—she lives over in San Saba now. That's why I'm here—to find out what I can about how Karl Dunning came to get killed here in Tarantula."

Waymire nodded thoughtfully. "Got to hand it to you Texas Rangers for getting to work on a case pronto. Eighteen year ago come Fourth of July, and here you are, working on the case. . . . Yeah, I remember Karl well. Fact is, I grubstaked him on his last jaunt into the Guadalupes."

Hatfield said, "Did you know he struck it rich on that last trip, Zeke? He brought back a boot full of gold to prove it. Or at least that's what he wrote his wife the day before he died."

Waymire's puckered face showed no amazement. "Nobody knows that better'n I do, Hatfield. Karl showed me that boot full of *oro*—he doubled my grubstake out of it, and promised to make me half-owner of his mine, according to our agreement."

The oldster pointed toward a poker table in a nearby corner.

"Karl got himself into a poker game over yonder. I recollect who he was playing with the night he died. Three hombres—two of 'em dead and gone now. Carl Lansing, he got scalped by Comanches over on the Llano Estecado the next winter; a Wells-Fargo tender named Red Harkness; and the town schoolmaster, Prof. Sykes. He married a dance-hall gal an moved to Ohio that fall. Died of pneumony."

Hatfield's brain raced. He had the feeling that he raised a warm breeze on Tarantula's cold trail. Three men had played poker with Karl Dunning on the eve of his murder, men who must have known of the prospector's lucky strike. Two were dead. But the third bore a name which J. C. Shafter had called out last night, an instant before his death.

"This Red Harkness you mentioned," Hatfield said. "Is he the same Harkness who wears a miner's duds, here in town?"

Waymire's eyes twinkled. "For a stranger, you learn fast. Yep, that's the same Harkness. One of Jeffries' shaft supers over at the Seventy-two diggings. Harkness left town this morning not two minutes before you showed up out front, Hatfield. Like as not you'd have seen him otherwise."

The Ranger settled back. "Tell me more," he prompted. "Whatever you can remember about Karl Dunning's last hours."

Waymire began shaving tobacco from a cut plug.

"Well, he played poker until after midnight, using gold-dust to buy chips with. Luck was running ag'in him, but he was rich and didn't care. I was busy at the bar so I don't know exactly when he quit the game, but I know the others kept playing until I blowed out the lights around four in the morning. Come daylight, I started swampin' out the place. Got around to the back porch, and that was when I seen poor old Karl lying sprawled out with a knife in his back."

"No trace of his boot full of gold dust?"

"Nary a trace then or since. There went my gold mine."

"And his killer was never found?"

"No. Anybody could of done it, knowing Karl was toting gold. It was the night of July Fourth, and the town was jammed. It was a Sunday, so Karl never got around to filing his claim. Which means whoever knifed him got his map of the mine location, too."

Hatfield said, "Any personal hunch who stabbed your pardner, Zeke?"

"Could of been any one of a hundred men, like I told you."

"But surely you have *someone* you suspect did it."

Waymire chuckled. "You think Jeffries done for Dunning, eh?"

The point-blank question caught Hatfield off-guard. From the moment he had read the *Tribune's* account of Dunning's death he had suspected Holt Jeffries—or rather, from the moment Jill Mitchell had told him the sheriff had discovered a gold claim.

"Well," Hatfield admitted, "how does the circumstantial evidence shape up? Karl Dunning made a gold strike. He's murdered the day before he can file his location at the courthouse, which makes it seem reasonable that he was carrying a map of his gold claim at the time he was killed. A year later the sheriff, who had sent false information to Mrs. Dunning concerning how her husband died, makes himself a gold strike back in the mountains. How does it add up to you, Waymire?"

THE old man grinned enigmatically. "Bible says gold is where you find it. The sheriff was trailing a rustler back in Placentia Canyon. His horse pulled up some mesquite grass and Jeffries noticed bright yeller pebbles clinging to the roots. It assayed out fine gold. So he filed a claim and called it the Seventy-two Mine. Who can blame him for turning in his star and becoming a mine operator?"

Hatfield met Waymire's stare. "Then you think as I do, don't you? You think that Holt Jeffries' story about finding grass-roots gold was a lie. You think he had Dunning's location map with him when he made that strike, that trailing an outlaw into the back country was just a pretext."

Waymire shrugged. "He didn't bring any outlaw back, dead or alive. We only got his word for it there *was* an outlaw. And I'll grant you maybe Holt Jeffries had Dunning's location map in his possession. But I can tell you this much, Hatfield. He didn't kill Karl Dunning to get that map!"

Hatfield tensed. If what Waymire said could be proved, then it knocked his own belief in Jeffries' guilt sky-high.

"How can you be sure Jeffries didn't stab Dunning?"

"Because the sheriff was over in El Paso when it happened, much as I hate to say it, having reason to hate Jeffries' guts. El Paso is a good hundred miles west o' Tarantula as the crow flies. I *wish* you could pin that murder on Jeffries—but you can't."

Reluctant to see his case against the ex-sheriff torn to pieces, Jim Hatfield said earnestly, "That was eighteen years ago, Zeke. A long time for a man to remember details. Isn't it possible Jeffries just *said* he was in El Paso the night of the murder. Just as he said, but couldn't necessarily prove, that he was back in the Guadalupes trailing a rustler when he made his gold strike?"

But Waymire was positive. "It's a matter of public record that Holt Jeffries left for El Paso the last day of June, four days before old Karl come out of the mountains with his pack-mule, four days before the murder. It can likewise be proved that Jeffries didn't get back to Tarantuler till the sixth of July, two days after Dunning was found stabbed and murdered."

"What was Jeffries doing in El Paso, Waymire?"

"Testifying at a court trial that had to do with a Tarantula citizen who'd been arrested for smuggling down on the Rio Grande. The trial adjourned the day after the Fourth and the El Paso court records will prove Holt Jeffries was right in the witness stand before and after the big holiday."

Hatfield's shoulders slumped. "I could check on that when I get to El Paso," he reminded Waymire.

"You do that," the old man said. "I know what I'm talkin' about, because when Jeffries filed his gold claim I was suspicious of him same as you are. I made a trip to 'Paso to make certain Jeffries *was* out of town the night Karl Dunning died. He's got an alibi you couldn't crack in a thousand years."

Before Jim Hatfield could speak, Zeke Waymire suddenly lifted a gnarled finger to his lips, cautioning silence. His eyes slid past the ranger.

"Company coming, Hatfield," he whispered warningly. "Speak of the devil—"

The batwings swung open and two men stepped into the barroom. One was the *Tribune* editor, Hamp Dockery. The other was black-coated, stocky mine-owner Holt Jeffries.

CHAPTER V

Dockery's Secret

AT THE same instant the two men caught sight of Hatfield. Seeing Marshal Shafter's prisoner out of jail, wearing his guns and his Ranger badge in plain sight, undoubtedly came as a total surprise to both. Yet by no flicker of a cheek muscle did either Jeffries or Dockery register any guilty reaction.

"Well, well!" Holt Jeffries said heartily. "Ranger Jim Hatfield! I'm glad you didn't leave town before I had an opportunity to apologize for my part in getting the Lone Wolf arrested yesterday, Hatfield. A most unfortunate error."

"So?" the Ranger responded drily. "I expect no apologies, Mr. Jeffries. After all, I was violating your gun-toting ordinance. Shafter merely did his duty."

Jeffries stepped forward to grab Hatfield's hand. "But our ordinance hardly applies to Texas Rangers, Hatfield. If Shafter or I had had any inkling—"

Hatfield nodded toward Dockery. "Your editor friend knew I was a Ranger, Mr. Jeffries. Why didn't he speak up when he saw Shafter marching me off to the hoosegow?"

Jeffries dropped the Ranger's hand and turned to scowl at Hamp Dockery. The scar-faced newspaperman was wearing an inscrutable, blank expression.

"You knew Hatfield, Hamp? I wasn't aware of that."

The editor regarded Hatfield balefully. "I didn't know him from Adam's off-ox when he rode in yesterday," he said. He fished in a pocket for his wad of copy paper and riffled through it until he found what he was hunting for. "This Ranger told me he was a saddle bum drifting through, cattle business in New Mex, and that his name was Field."

Dockery met Hatfield's gaze without flinching, as if defying him to contradict his statement.

"Sure," Hatfield said. "I gave you a false name. That's my practice when I'm in strange territory, working incognito. But *you* told the marshal I was Jim Hatfield, when you came over to the jail after a newspaper item last night. With me sprawled out in a cell, dead to the world."

Dockery stuffed his papers back in his pocket. "If Shafter told you that, he's a liar. I'll tell him so to his face."

Hatfield thought, The next time you see the marshal, he'll be on a morgue slab, Dockery. And I got a hunch you know it.

Aloud Hatfield said, "'*Sta nada*. The point is, as soon as I rallied around from Shafter's gun-whipping last night, he turned me loose."

Dockery and Jeffries exchanged quick glances which could mean anything or nothing. Then the mine owner turned to Zeke Waymire, who had remained in his chair beside the poker table throughout the exchange among the three men, and said to the saloonman:

"Dockery and I came in for our morning drink, Zeke. . . . You'll join us, Hatfield? It's not often we have the honor of drinking with a—a celebrity, shall we say?"

Hatfield shook his head. "No, thanks. Too early in the day. Could either of you gentlemen tell me where I can locate the marshal? I discovered after I left the jail last night that he'd frisked me, took my Ranger credentials. I can't leave town until I've got 'em back."

Dockery's answer was a blank stare and a negative headshake. But Holt Jeffries said quietly, "Why, as a matter of fact the marshal has headed upcanyon to my diggings, Hatfield. He left a note on the jail door to that effect."

Hatfield's brows arched. "So?" he asked. "I just came from the jail. The front door was locked. I didn't see any note saying Shafter was out of town."

Jeffries said easily, "I believe the note was tacked to the back door. One of my supers from the Seventy-two had business with Shafter this morning. He told me that Shafter pinned a note on the back door, saying he'd gone out to the diggings last night. Looks like he and Harkness missed connections. It—it's about a little trouble between two of our Mexican muckers out there. Harkness wanted Shafter to make an arrest."

JIM HATFIELD turned Jeffries' words over in his mind, unable to come to any conclusion about the man's sincerity or lack of it. Jeffries had freely admitted that Harkness had visited the jail office this morning, hunting the missing marshal, and that Harkness had been to Jeffries' own office. On the face of it, Hatfield had to admit it appeared as if Jeffries knew nothing of his mine super's having shot a man last night at the back door of the jail.

"This leaves me in a bad fix," Hatfield grumbled. "I'm on my way to El Paso on Ranger business. I can't show up without proof of my identity."

Hamp Dockery suggested casually, "You're wearing your star. What more proof would you need?"

Hatfield grinned. "Anybody could wear a Ranger badge, Dockery." Staring at the newspaper editor, the feeling was stronger than ever that his trail had crossed Dockery's somewhere in the past. Yet from all he had heard, Dockery had been here in Tarantula for years, running the newspaper.

Jeffries looked up suddenly. "I have a suggestion that may settle your difficulty, Hatfield," he said. "You say you're on your way to 'Paso?"

"That's right."

"Then my Seventy-two Mine won't be too much out of your way. It's fifteen miles up the canyon, half a day's ride on that fine sorrel of yours. We have a wagon road from the Seventy-two westward to El Paso—haul our ore out for smelting in El Paso."

"Meaning what, Mr. Jeffries?"

"The marshal rode out to the Seventy-two last night. If he took away your papers, he's probably still carrying them—maybe an oversight. You could pick up your credentials from Shafter, have chow at the mine, and be on your way west

by mid-afternoon."

Hatfield pretended to overlook the obvious flaw in Holt Jeffries' reasoning. If Shafter had possession of his papers—which reposed in the money belt under Hatfield's shirt at this moment—he would have locked them up in his desk or the jail safe yesterday.

"Reckon that's my best bet, Jeffries," the Lone Wolf conceded. "No chance of missing Shafter on the canyon trail?"

Jeffries grinned. "No chance. Once you enter Placentia Canyon, you couldn't leave it if you wanted to—high rimrocks all the way to the mine. And there's a toll gate only four miles up the canyon. The gate tender can tell you if Shafter's ridden back out this morning."

A disturbing thought struck Hatfield, hearing about the toll gate. Red Harkness had headed up the canyon this morning, and there was a good chance that toll gate keeper would tell Harkness the marshal hadn't ridden up the canyon last night, as he was supposed to have done.

Hamp Dockery had strolled over to the bar, where Zeke Waymire was setting out bottle and glasses. Jeffries said, "I especially regret Shafter's roughing you up at the jail office yesterday, Hatfield. He is a simple-minded man and got the crazy notion you were trying to attack him."

Hatfield reached up to finger the blood-caked bruises on his skull.

"Shafter made up for that after I came to." He grinned. "It was my fault for not telling him sooner I was a Ranger. But I didn't want to do it out on the street with a crowd looking on. One of the bunch might have been the one who took a shot at me out at the graveyard."

Leaving the Aztec with the remark that he would saddle up and ride for the

"I'll see if he's in."

Seventy-two diggings immediately, Jim Hatfield was aware of an overwhelming frustration. If Zeke Waymire's story was true, then Jeffries had had no part in Karl Dunning's murder. By the same token, perhaps Jeffries had had no part in last night's trumped-up jail-break plot.

INSTINCTIVELY he trusted Waymire, and was ready to accept the bartender's story of Karl Dunning's last hours as being wholly true. But even so, he could not write off Jeffries as being in the clear. He had seen Jeffries' letter to Mrs. Dunning, saying that her husband's death had been accidental.

Why had Jeffries lied? To spare a widow the grief of knowing her husband had been murdered? That didn't make

sense. A more obvious explanation would be that Holt Jeffries wanted to do everything in his power to keep Mrs. Dunning from launching an investigation into the circumstances of her husband's death.

Two other things weighed heavily on Hatfield's mind, things he intended to track down. One was Jill Mitchell's strange actions at the *Tribune* office yesterday, then coming out to ask him why he was interested in Karl Dunning's death.

The other was his growing belief that he and Hamp Dockery had met in the past.

Maybe I can clear up both matters, he told himself, by dropping in for another visit at the *Tribune*. I ought to be able to get Jill to talk about Dockery.

Approaching the print shop, he noticed that two saddled horses were hitched out front, one a strawberry roan which seemed vaguely familiar. It was branded Rafter H. The other was a *bayo coyote* mare wearing a TL iron, which probably meant it was rented from the Tarantula Livery down the street.

Climbing the porch steps to the shop, Hatfield caught sight of Jill and a young man in cowboy clothing, standing just inside the door. They were so deeply engrossed in earnest conversation they were not aware of Hatfield's presence until his shadow fell across the threshold.

"Oh!" Jill cried, starting violently. "It—it's Mr. Field!"

As she cried out his alias, it seemed to bring a strange reaction from the cowboy with her. He jerked around, his right hand tensing over the gun he wore in a thonged-down holster.

"Miss Mitchell," Hatfield said bluntly, "I've got to talk to you. In private."

The girl flashed a desperate glance at her companion. The cowboy said harshly, "I'm Jill's fiancé, Tom Harkness. We were just leaving for a little horseback ride over to my spread. We got no time for palaver, Field."

Hatfield moved to block the doorway. He jerked a thumb up to the Ranger star on his shirt.

"This is important palaver—" He broke off, staring at the cowboy. "Did you say your name was Harkness?"

The man nodded. "I was so baptized."

Hatfield pulled in a hard breath. "I ran into another Harkness last night—Red Harkness. Any relation?"

Tom Harkness shrugged. "Could be, but distant if he is. A whole tribe of Harknesses settled out here after the Civil War. Red's maybe my forty-second cousin."

Hatfield stared at the gun in Tom Harkness' holster. Could that have been the weapon which had cut down J. C. Shafter last night?

"Let's be sloping, honey," Harkness said, taking Jill's arm.

Hatfield held up a hand. "Just a minute, you two. I was about to introduce myself. My name isn't Jim Field, Miss Mitchell. It's Jim Hatfield. I'm a Texas Ranger. I've got some questions to ask you. Official questions."

She seemed to shrink before the Ranger's eyes. She said in a weak voice, "What questions—sir?"

"Why were you so disturbed about my wanting to look up Karl Dunning's grave yesterday?"

Jill clung to Tom Harkness' arm for support. "I—I wasn't disturbed!" she said frantically. "You — you're imagining things, Mr. Field—Mr. Hatfield."

OBVIOUSLY she was lying. And Hatfield decided she would never talk unless they were alone. Whatever the mystery behind Jill Mitchell, it was something her fiancé did not know about.

"*'Sta bueno,*" Hatfield said. "Now there's something I'd like to ask you about your boss, Hamp Dockery. He knows I'm a Ranger, even though I was not wearing my badge when I dropped in at this office yesterday. How would he know that?"

Jill shook her head helplessly. "I—I don't know, sir."

Tom Harkness said quietly, "I can tell you how he knew, Hatfield. The *Tribune* ran a picture of you a few months back, taken down in Del Rio when you broke

up that smuggling gang."

Disappointment stabbed the Ranger. The Del Rio photograph was one of the few ever taken of him while on duty and it had been published in nearly every paper in Texas. That, then, accounted for Hamp Dockery recognizing him. But it did not explain why Dockery was familiar to Hatfield.

"What I wanted to find out," he said doggedly, "is where I've seen Dockery before. I've never been in Tarantula before, so it was somewhere else. Where did Dockery come from before he arrived in Tarantula?"

Again it was Tom Harkness who supplied information.

"Dockery's pretty close-mouthed about himself," Harkness said, "but he got drunk once and ran off at the tongue. Said he used to run a weekly paper over in the Nueces country—paper called the *Brushpopper*. During the War. He lost it to a blue-nosed Yankee carpet-bagger."

The words, Nueces, and Brushpopper were the keys which unlocked the mystery of Hamp Dockery in Jim Hatfield's brain. As suddenly as that, he knew why Hamp Dockery's scarred face seemed so familiar to him. Actually, they had never met.

The Ranger's mind ran back to one day last winter when he had been going through Captain Roaring Bill McDowell's file of reward dodgers in the Ranger headquarters at Austin. One of those time-yellowed blazers he had dug out of a file of Nueces county rogues' gallery pictures had carried Hamp Dockery's scar-faced image, without the spade beard.

At the moment, Hatfield did not have the slightest memory as to what crime Hamp Dockery had committed, or what name was under the man's picture. But he knew, in the light of what Tom Harkness had just revealed, that the editor of the Tarantula *Tribune* was on the dodge, wanted for some crime over in the Nueces country, a man who had been hiding for nearly a quarter of a century here in Tarantula.

"If—if that's all, sir," Jill Mitchell said, "Tom and I will be going. We haven't seen each other in weeks, and he wants me to spend a few days with his folks over on the Rafter H."

Harkness said gruffly, "Whether he likes it or not, darling, we've wasted enough time pow-wowing here."

Jim Hatfield grinned, at ease now. "Sorry I delayed you two love-birds. I'm obliged for the information. Now I know how your boss spotted me even when I wasn't wearing a Ranger badge."

Watching Tom Harkness and the girl lope off down the street, stirrup by stirrup, Hatfield found it difficult to link Jill's handsome young fiancé with the Harkness who had killed J. C. Shafter last night. As Tom had said, Harkness was a common name in this part of Texas.

He had tarried in this town with the hope of solving the twenty-year-old mystery of Karl Dunning's death. But if he failed in that, he still would have something to show for his side trip to Tarantula. Quite by accident he had unearthed the hiding place of a fugitive from Nueces justice. Hamp Dockery.

A telegram to Ranger Headquarters would send Captain McDowell to his Nueces file, for detailed information about a fugitive with a zigzag scar across his forehead.

CHAPTER VI

Missing Corpse

HATFIELD crossed the weed-grown courthouse square toward the county barn, intending to saddle Goldy. He had no intention of leaving Tarantula permanently, as he had told Holt Jeffries over in the Aztec, but he did intend to take a jaunt up to the Seventy-two Mine in Placentia Canyon today, even though it had nothing to do with the Dunning mystery.

His only reason for wanting to make that ride was to test Holt Jeffries. It had seemed to him that Jeffries had been trying to get him to ride up to the Seventy-two diggings, to look for Shafter. It had the smell of an ambush trap, Jeffries' eagerness to suggest the Placentia Canyon trek. But an ambush had less chance of succeeding if the intended victim was forewarned.

Entering the barn, Hatfield was surprised to see that the strawberry roan, the horse he had assumed last night was Shafter's mount, was missing from the first stall. Then it came to him. That roan was the one Tom Harkness had been riding this morning. For some reason, the Rocking H puncher had kept his saddle horse in Shafter's stable, instead of in a private livery.

Making his way down the row of stalls to where Goldy was whickering impatiently, Hatfield took the big sorrel out to the corral behind the barn and let Goldy drink at a brimming water trough. Then, leading the horse back into the barn to saddle up, he noticed something changed about the manger of the third stall.

None of the hay he had forked atop the dead marshal was there now.

Yanking his cinch tight, Jim Hatfield went over to the stall and peered into the manger. Shafter's body was gone! On the upper rim of the manger, where the wooden ledge had been splintered by chafing halter chains so that it was tufted with stray horsehairs, was a deep brown stain. Dried blood which had come from Shafter's bullet wound, as conspicuous as a smear of red paint.

Hatfield fought off a wave of panic. His own safety depended upon the town thinking Shafer had left for the mine. But during the night or early this morning, someone had made the grisly discovery that a dead lawman was hidden in this manger.

"Get your arms up fast, hombre!"

The voice coming from the left of Jim Hatfield, catching him by surprise, had a lethal quality.

He jerked around, to find himself staring into the flashing brown eyes of Tom Harkness, the Rocking H cowhand he had assumed to be out riding with Jill Mitchell. For some reason, Harkness had tracked the Lone Wolf back to the barn.

The sixgun in Tom Harkness' fist was trained on Hatfield's middle shirt button. There was a shine in the waddy's eyes which warned the Ranger he was close to death. A whit more pressure on that trigger—

"What's the idea, Tom?" Hatfield asked, slowly turning and raising both hands hatbrim high.

Tom Harkness stradlled the stall partition to come in closer, thumb taut on knurled gunhammer.

"You killed Shafter last night, busting jail! You hid his body in that manger."

The thought that came to the Lone Wolf had a stunning impact. What if Tom Harkness *had* been the gunhawk waiting at the corner of the courthouse last night to gun down an escaping prisoner of Shafter's?

Dark as the night had been, it was still possible that Harkness had doubled back after taking flight, and had seen Hatfield carrying the marshal's corpse over to the barn.

"You've got it all figured out, haven't you, Tom?" Hatfield said quietly. "Seem to be pretty sure of your facts."

TOM HARKNESS licked his lips. "Can't be any other way. First thing I heard when I got to town last night was how Shafter had jailed a stranger for violating the gun-toting law. The stranger they said, was Jim Field, the name Jill knew you by. I knew the minute Jill called your name over there at the *Tribune* office that you must have broke jail last night. And you had to shoot the marshal to do it!"

Hatfield nodded slowly. "I get it. You stabled your horse in this barn last night. You discovered Shafter's body when you came to saddle up this morning."

Tam Harkness flushed. "No room at the town livery. Shafter often let riders use the county barn here. Sure, I found the

marshal's carcass. Flies were buzzing on that blood smear on the manger."

"Then you knew he was dead all the time I was talking to you and Jill just now?"

"Sure. I'd just got through telling Jill what I'd found in that manger when you showed up."

"Why didn't you throw a gun on me then?"

"I couldn't risk the chance of a gun fight, with Jill standing by. I knew if I gave you enough rope you'd hang yourself. That's why I trailed you back to this barn."

For the moment at least, Hatfield could not make up his mind about Tom Harkness. He *could* have been the Harkness who shot Marshal Shafter.

"Look," Tom said suddenly. "Like I told Jill, I don't know what to do, you being a Ranger. With the marshal dead, the nearest law is down at the county seat. So I'm going for the sheriff—but I ain't taking you along. For all I know you might have *compadres* in town who'd track me down, bushwhack me."

"But you know I'm Jim Hatfield."

"A Ranger can turn killer, can't he? And you killed the marshal. Not that J. C. Shafter meant anything to me—he was a bootlicker who jumped when Holt Jeffries pulled the right strings. But I know I've got to make sure you stay hitched until I can get back with the county sheriff."

Stepping forward, Harkness reamed the muzzle of his Colt sight-deep between Hatfield's ribs. With his free hand, the cowboy lifted the Ranger's sixguns from leather and tossed them in the oats box of the manger behind Hatfield.

Then, backing away, Harkness ordered, "Head around behind the stalls to that granary yonder. Don't make any booger moves, Hatfield."

Some of the tension left the Ranger, now that he was disarmed and offered no threat to Harkness. Perhaps Harkness was what he appeared to be—a cow hand who believed he had captured a killer, and intended to see justice done.

Heading toward a plank wall outside the row of stalls, Hatfield halted in front of a closed door. This, he knew, was the metal-lined bin which protected the barn's supply of oats from being infested with rats.

Keeping his gun on Hatfield, Tom Harkness pulled the door open. Dim light fall-

A TALL TEXAS TALE

HIGH HEEL

WHEN I was tending bar at Zulch, Texas, I met up with all kinds of people. For instance, one day in walks a kangaroo. Business was poor and in them days we couldn't put in a line of greeting cards on the side to pick us up. The only method we had was to raise prices on strangers. So I soaked the kangaroo $1.40 for a drink. He never winced, just dug down in his pouch and coughed up.

He was such a good sport that I felt like a heel, and as he was leaving I said, "I'm glad you happened along. We don't have many kangaroos coming in these days."

Like a flash he turned and said, "I should think not at a dollar-forty a shot!" ***—W. L. Hudson***

ing into the barn revealed tiers of sacked oats, the dull glint of sheet metal panels nailed to the inner walls for protection against rodents.

And Hatfield saw something else—a sprawled human shape on the sheet-iron floor of the granary. J. C. Shafter, stiffened in the posture his body had assumed last night after Hatfield had dumped him into the manger. This was where Tom Harkness had moved the missing dead man this morning.

"Inside, Field—or Hatfield, whatever your name is. This'll do for a jail until I get back from Van Horn with the sheriff. I'll leave it up to the law, what's to be done about you and Shafter's killing."

Hatfield bridled. Van Horn was a good forty miles south of Tarantula. It would take Harkness all day to get there, and even if the sheriff started back for Tarantula immediately, they couldn't be back here before sunup tomorrow. The prospect of spending a day and a night locked up in Stygian blackness with a dead man was not appealing.

"Now look, Tom," he argued. "You know I'm a Ranger. I'll ride down to the county seat with you. I—"

WITH a sudden lunge, Tom Harkness drove his shoulder against Hatfield. The Ranger was knocked off his feet by the unexpected shove, falling headlong onto the cold tin floor.

Even as he was bouncing to his feet, he saw Harkness slam the thick plank door shut, head the clatter of a bolt sliding into its socket. The metal-lined walls were virtually sound-proof. He could hear nothing of Harkness leaving the barn.

Hatfield struck a match, shuddering as he peered down into J. C. Shafter's pallid face, twisted into the expression of horror the marshal had assumed the instant of his death.

The matchlight convinced Hatfield that getting out of this cubicle would be next to impossible. Even the ceiling was protected with sheet-iron layers. There was even a chance that his oxygen supply might give out in a few hours in this unventilated tomb. The odor of dessicated grain filled the granary.

As the match burned out between his fingers, Hatfield sat down on an upended sack of oats and decided to resign himself to a twenty-hour wait in this dungeon. In fact, he told himself, he might be lucky to be alive when Harkness got back from Van Horn with the sheriff, assuming that the puncher was telling the truth about his plans. What if someone else chanced to open the granary—the unknown gunman, for instance, who had attempted to bushwhack him over in the churchyard yesterday? Or Holt Jeffries, who had railroaded him into Shafter's jail on a flimsy pretext?

He rolled a smoke, then decided not to light it. No use fouling the air further with tobacco fumes. There was no use in wasting his energy trying to batter the door open, either. It was made of six-inch-thick planks, solidly bolted together, and locked from the outside. He had a knife in his pocket, but the tin lining of the granary would prevent him from trying to cut through the wooden walls.

With darkness pressing down from all sides, Hatfield had no way of measuring the passage of time. He struck another match and found that his watch had run down some time during the night. Just as well. Time would pass quicker if he had no way of measuring it.

It might have been ten minutes, it might have been an hour when the trapped Ranger heard the scrape of metal on metal and knew the bar was being slid out of its socket on the granary door. He came tensely to his feet, eyes glued to the slit of daylight where the door was being pulled back with infinite slowness.

Who was out there in the barn? A hostler, coming for feed? Or Tom Harkness, his mind changed about keeping him prisoner?

Then the door was jerked wide open, and Hatfield found himself peering into a leveled gun held by Holt Jeffries. Hamp Dockery was crouched at the mining man's side, gun in hand.

The two stiffened as they caught sight

of Shafter's body on the granary floor. Then their guns lifted to cover the Ranger standing beside the dead man.

"We figured you'd be in here, Hatfield," Jeffries said quietly. "Hamp and I saw you come into this barn and we didn't see you or your horse come back out. Then we saw Tom Harkness duck in, packing a gun, and when he left he was alone, and in a considerable hurry. So we decided to investigate. This granary was the only place you could have been."

Hatfield took a step forward, but halted when he heard the double click of Jeffries' Colt coming to full cock.

"We're satisfied to have you stay where you are, Hatfield," the mine owner said. "Maybe you can be persuaded to answer a few questions."

"Such as what?" Hatfield knew his only chance would be to stall for time, wait for this pair to relax their guard.

"To hell with palaver, Holt!" Hamp Dockery snarled. "I'm for blasting him down and being done with it."

Jeffries shot the editor a cold glance. "You had your chance to blast him down in the graveyard yesterday, Hamp. You botched it. Now I'm taking over."

Hatfield grinned bleakly. It came as no great surprise, learning that Hamp Dockery had trailed him from the newspaper office to the churchyard, that here was the man with whom he had swapped lead yesterday. That ambush attempt was in some way connected with Karl Dunning's murder. But at the moment, Jim Hatfield doubted if he would live long enough to probe any deeper into the eighteen-year-old mystery.

CHAPTER VII

Death in the Saddle

DELIBERATELY Holt Jeffries' gaze swung back to the Ranger standing in the semi-darkness of the granary.

"Let's begin at the beginning, Hatfield," he said softly. "What brought you to Tarantula?"

"I told you this morning. I'm on my way to El Paso. On Ranger business."

Jeffries grinned, with no humor in it. "But you didn't ride on through our little town. For some reason, you were impelled to stop at Dockery's newspaper office and dig out the Eighteen-Seventy-one files."

When Hatfield did not answer, Dockery said testily, "I've already told you why he did that, Holt. He was snooping for details about Karl Dunning's death."

Jeffries went on tauntingly, "And just what facts did you uncover, Hatfield?"

The Lone Wolf met Jeffries' stare point-blank. "For one thing," he said, "I found out that Dunning was murdered, that he wasn't drunk and bucked off a horse, breaking his neck, as you wanted his widow to believe."

The predatory smile widened under Jeffries' mustache.

"An act of mercy on the part of an officer of the law, wanting to shield the brutal truth from a bereaved woman, Hatfield. Hardly any cause to bring a Texas Ranger so far to investigate a killing so long in the past."

Hatfield glanced down at the dead Shafter. "You know all the answers, Jeffries," he said. "Except maybe why your paid gunslinger, Red Harkness, killed the wrong man during that jail break last night. You tried hard enough to put me out of the way without stirring up trouble."

Jeffries shrugged indifferently. "Shafter was a fool. He had outlived his usefulness to me, but he served his purpose. Do you know what Dockery is going to print in next week's *Tribune* about Shafter's death, Hatfield?"

"You tell me," retorted the Ranger.

Jeffries glanced at the glowering editor at his elbow.

"The *Tribune* is going to inform the town that for unexplained reasons, our city marshal died in a gunfight with a Texas Ranger—but not before he had put

a fatal slug in your guts, Hatfield."

It was out in the open now, the bleak inevitability of his own doom which Jim Hatfield had sensed from the moment the granary door had opened to reveal these two gunmen. He would die, and his death would be attributed to the dead Shafter, and Jeffries's part in the deal would never come to light.

"I can give your friend Dockery something to think about while he's setting up the story of my murder in type, Jeffries," Hatfield said. "He won't be around Tarantula much longer."

The color faded from Dockery's cheeks. "Meaning what, Ranger?" he demanded hoarsely.

"I visited the Overland Telegraph office yesterday," Hatfield said, "and dispatched a coded message to Ranger headquarters in Austin. You can confirm that with the operator."

"What message?" Dockery asked thickly. "You ain't pinning Karl Dunning's murder on me, Ranger."

Hatfield shook his head. "Dunning has nothing to do with your being on the dodge, Dockery. Remember what happened over in the Nueces country when you were publishing a sheet called the *Brushpopper?* The Rangers haven't closed that case, Dockery. They've waited a long time to find out what ever became of you."

Hamp Dockery commenced shaking as if with ague.

He said to Holt Jeffries in a strangled whisper, "He's lying, Holt. The Rangers got nothing on me."

Jeffries' eyes had narrowed to slits. He lifted his left hand to finger his lower lip, staring thoughtfully at Jim Hatfield.

"Interesting," he said. "What's the story, Hatfield?"

"Why not ask your friend Dockery?" Hatfield suggested.

JEFFRIES turned to the scar-faced editor and said in a voice thick with menace, "I don't think I will have to worry about that special edition of the *Tribune* you've been holding over me all these years, Hamp. I think Hatfield has trumped your ace. It almost makes me hate to have to put a bullet in his belly, knowing that."

For a moment, Hatfield thought that Dockery was going to swing his gun on Holt Jeffries.

The same thought touched the mine owner, for his Colt left Hatfield and swung over to cover the *Tribune* editor.

"He's lying, Holt!" Dockery whined. "Can't you see he's just stalling for time? Blast him down and let's get to hell out of here."

Holt Jeffries pulled himself out of his own run of thoughts and turned back to face his bayed quarry. He said, almost apogetically, "I hate to do this to a man of your stature, Jim Hatfield. But coming to Tarantula this way, you uncovered a situation that—"

Whatever Jeffries was about to say was cut short by a sharp, high-pitched feminine voice coming from the open area of the barn behind the two men:

"Drop your guns, both of you! You're not going to kill a Ranger in cold blood—"

Jeffries and Hamp Dockery wheeled around. In the same instant Hatfield caught sight of Jill Mitchell silhouetted against the sunlit archway of the barn. She held a sixgun, its muzzle weaving between Jeffries and the man who employed her.

Hamp Dockery's fingers loosened on his gun butt; his .45 dropped to the ground at his feet.

Then the Ranger was charging out of the granary, his shoulder striking Holt Jeffries in the back.

The man went down with a shout of horror, his Colt flying from his hand. Hatfield drove a sledging fist to the hinge of Jeffries' jaw, smashing the ex-sheriff flat on his face before he could attempt to recover his feet.

Vaguely, through the clouding dust, Hatfield saw Hamp Dockery wheel about and start for the barn door at a run. He heard the sharp report of Jill Mitchell's six-gun, but her shot went wide. Then Dockery was past her and through the

barn door out of sight.

Unstraddling himself from Jeffries' sprawled body in the thick dust behind the row of stalls, Jim Hatfield scooped up the .45 which Dockery had dropped and sprinted toward Jill. She had run to the barn door and was lifting her gun for another shot at the escaping editor.

Her gun blazed as Hatfield gained the archway, having a full view of the courthouse plaza. He saw Jill's bullet kick up a spurt of dust at Hamp Dockery's heels as the editor sprinted for the shelter of the courthouse corner.

Hatfield raised his gun for a quick shot, but before he could bring his sights to bear on the target Dockery had again vanished from view.

"Ride herd on Jeffries!" Hatfield shouted to the girl. "If I don't dab a loop on that boss of yours he'll be gone from Tarantula for good!"

Without looking back Hatfield headed across the weed-grown courthouse yard as fast as he could manage in his tight-fitting spike-heeled Coffeyvilles. When he rounded the corner of the courthouse, he saw no trace of Hamp Dockery. But a lingering trail of dust showed him where the escaping newspaperman had gone through the outer gate onto Main Street.

Gun palmed, Hatfield raced in pursuit. The chase would be over if Dockery got a chance to vanish into the maze of alleys fronting the cowtown street.

He was nearing the gate through which Dockery had vanished when he distinctly heard the editor shouting a warning to someone out on the street, a warning that carried the name, "Texas Ranger!"

DOCKERY, then, had a confederate to back his play. Reaching the gate, Hatfield slowed to a walk before stepping out into view on the main stem.

A rider was reining his horse around in mid-street, heading toward the plaza gate, a rider with a drawn sixgun flashing in the flat morning sun rays. On the opposite side of the wide thoroughfare, Hamp Dockery was diving into the shadowy slot of an alley between two buildings. Hatfield got only the briefest pinched-off glimpse of him, then his attention shifted back to the rider heading his way.

Already the rider had spotted Hatfield emerging from the gate and his gun was suddenly blazing, filling the false-fronted canyon of Main Street with its rolling concussion. Slugs bracketed Jim Hatfield, chipped a shower of adobe from the wall at his right. The horse was headed straight at him, the rider bent on murder!

The Lone Wolf dropped into a crouch, his borrowed weapon exploding once, the recoil jarring the crotch of his thumb and tilting the muzzle skyward. Through showering dust kicked up by the oncoming horse's hooves, he saw the rider rock back against the cantle to the impact of lead tunneling his chest. He heard the man's gagged scream, saw him toppling from stirrups.

And then Hatfield was diving back behind the adobe wall surrounding the plaza, to keep from being trampled down by the stampeding horse. The big stallion was a dusty blur as it came through the narrow gate into the plaza behind Hatfield, and the impact of the rider's body slamming into the chained-back gate with force enough to snap the heavy wooden timbers was a grisly sound.

Recocking his gun, Hatfield stepped around the corner of the gate to stare at the dead man lying against the wall, his skull shattered open by the crash against the gate post. There was no recognizing the blood-smeared face at his feet. But the double-breasted blue woolen shirt identified Dockery's confederate. The rider who had come gunning for him to cover Hamp Dockery's getaway was the miner Jeffries had sent up the canyon this morning. Red Harkness.

The reason for Harkness' appearance now on the Tarantula scene was instantly obvious to Hatfield, because he had already reasoned out what might happen and which plainly had, instead of being a possibility. When Harkness had reached the Placentia Canyon toll house he had learned from the gatekeeper that Marshal

Shafter had not come upcanyon last night. So Harkness had hot-footed it back to Tarantula to report to Holt Jeffries—and had run into the fleeing editor instead.

Dockery. The man was somewhere across Main Street. He might have dug up a gun by now. But his capture was a chore Hatfield couldn't postpone. That the secret of Karl Dunning's murder was locked up in the editor's brain was certain, in Hatfield's mind.

He was starting across the street at Dockery's boot prints which led off across the thick dust toward the far alley, when he heard Jill Mitchell scream, "Ranger—Ranger!" from the direction of the courthouse barn.

He halted in his tracks. If he abandoned his chase of Hamp Dockery now he might never see the outlaw printer again. Back there in the granary, when Hatfield had expected any moment to be his last on earth, he had thrown terror into Dockery by pretending he had put the Texas Rangers on Dockery's trail to investigate the old Nueces charge which had sent Dockery into hiding. That bluff was boomeranging on Hatfield now. It would send Hamp Dockery out of Tarantula forever.

But if Jill had run into trouble of some kind, riding herd on Jeffries—

RELUCTANTLY Hatfield headed back through the plaza gate, past Red Harkness' motionless body by the adobe wall. Over by the jail the front legs of Harkness' pony were entangled in frayed bridle reins.

Hatfield was racing around the rear of the courthouse when he almost collided with Jill. She was chalk-pale, and blank terror was in her eyes. She was still carrying her sixgun, and Jeffries' Colt was thrust under her belt.

"Jill!" Hatfield cried, seizing her by the shoulders. "You all right?"

She got herself under control with a supreme effort.

"Jeffries—he's gone!" she choked. "You depended on me to hold him there, and I failed you!"

Hatfield swung away, head jerking in the direction of the barn. But Jill, reading his thought, clutched his arm.

"It's no use trying to chase him now. He's got too big a head-start—he ran out the back way."

The Ranger's jaw clamped. This was the worst possible thing that could have happened, even worse than letting Hamp Dockery get out of Tarantula. For Holt Jeffries was the gun-boss of this town and in minutes he might be able to unleash a wolf-pack of armed men to close in on the Ranger and the girl who could brand him before the town as an outlaw.

"What happened?" Hatfield demanded, trying to curb his temper. Jeffries' escape *must* be due to Jill's carelessness in guarding him, but recriminations would avail him nothing.

"He—must have been playing 'possum. I thought he was knocked out, he lay there so still. Then I heard shooting—I thought you and Hamp were fighting, that Hamp might kill you, so I ran out of the barn to see—"

Hatfield said brusquely, "Dockery got away, for the time being. It was Red Harkness I tangled with, and he's dead. Now what happened to Jeffries?"

Jill said hoarsely, "When I saw him running across the back corral I screamed for you. But he was running like a rabbit when he disappeared behind those buildings on Oak Street."

Hatfield, silent for a moment, tried to figure out his next move. With Jeffries on the loose, Jim Hatfield was a prime target for a bushwhack shot. But Jill was no safer than he was.

Jill was thinking the same thing. She tugged at his sleeve, begging tearfully, "We've got to get out of town, both of us! Jeffries will have a whole army of killers after us now that he knows he's *got* to put us out of the way. My horse is in front of the *Tribune*—"

Hatfield shook his head. "Running away would only mean drawing Jeffries' wolf pack out into the desert after us, Jill. No. I've got to dab my loop on him and Hamp Dockery. But I've got to get

you to some place of safety *now!*"

Jill said frantically, "Tom's on his way to Van Horn. I have a fast horse. I could ride after him and meet him and the sheriff on their way back here. Tom has the crazy idea that you murdered Marshal Shafter!"

No, Hatfield thought, Jill wouldn't be safe, riding alone across forty miles of desert. If her horse went lame, she'd be overtaken by the gunhawks Holt Jeffries would be certain to send after her.

"Jill," he said suddenly. "You trust me, don't you?"

"If I hadn't I wouldn't have come over to the barn when I saw Hamp and Jeffries here. I knew Tom had locked you in the granary."

Hatfield grinned bleakly. "I'd have been dead now if you hadn't come, Jill. I owe you my life . . . Listen. There's one man in town I think we can trust to give us a helping hand."

JILL shook her head. "We can trust no one. This is Holt Jeffries' town. I've lived here long enough to know that, Mr. Hatfield."

"How about Zeke Waymire, at the Aztec Saloon? I have reason to believe he's no friend of Jeffries'."

Some of the tension left Jill. "Mr. Waymire . . . Yes, I think we could trust him. But how can he help us?"

Now Hatfield could leave Jill in safe hands while he forced a showdown against Holt Jeffries' gunlaw here in Tarantula.

"Zeke can hide you in the Aztec while I—"

"While you go after Hamp and Jeffries?" she cut in. "You wouldn't last ten minutes in this town, fighting them alone! You've got to wait until Tom gets back with the sheriff."

Hatfield took her arm and headed toward Main Street.

"Tomorrow would be too late, Jill. I've got a job to do—as a lawman. I think Jeffries will head back to his office, to get guns if nothing else. And I'll be there waiting for him!"

CHAPTER VIII

Dunning's Killer

EXCITED townspeople had gathered around Red Harkness' battered body at the plaza gate. To avoid that crowd, Hatfield led Jill to another exit on a side street and in minutes was hurrying her through the batwings of Zeke Waymire's deadfall.

Old Waymire, long since inured to violence on the street, was idly polishing glassware behind his bar. Bending an astonished glance at the girl with Hatfield, he asked casually:

"How's the manhunt going, Ranger? Located Karl Dunning's bushwhacker yet?"

Hatfield said, "Hope to have the answer to that one before noon, Zeke, in which case you're liable to find yourself half-owner of a stolen gold mine. Right now, I want you to do me a favor."

Waymire scrubbed the pine bar with a moist rag, his eyes still fixed curiously on Jill Mitchell.

"It's no favor to me, bringing a respectable woman into my place of business, Hatfield. The church crowd find out they're li'ble to get me locked up."

The Lone Wolf said earnestly, "Zeke, Holt Jeffries would have killed me half an hour ago if Miss Mitchell there hadn't shown up with a gun. Jeffries got away. Until I corral him, I've got to find a safe hideout for her. You're the only one I can turn to."

Waymire grinned paternally. "Always glad to accommodate the law. Miss Mitchell'll be as safe with me as she would be stashed in God's pocket."

Jill said in a frightened voice, "If I had my way I'd ride out of this town. Can't you persuade Jim Hatfield that that's the best thing he could do, with Holt Jeffries gunning for him?"

Waymire pulled open the drawer of his cash till and took out a ring of keys.

"Knowing Hatfield's rep for getting his man, I'd say it was useless asking him to run. You come along with me. She'll be safe inside the Aztec, Hatfield."

Taking Jill's arm, Hatfield could feel a shudder go through the girl. Waymire was unlocking a door to the left of his bar. Opening it, the saloonkeeper beckoned the Ranger to bring Jill into the back room.

"You've got to keep out of sight until I tell you the coast is clear, Jill," Hatfield warned. "Jeffries or his paid gunhawks won't think to look for you in a saloon."

The room Waymire had offered as temporary refuge for the girl was obviously the old man's combination office and living quarters. The remains of a meal had been left on an oil-cloth covered table in mid-room. A brass bed occupied a far corner, its soogans in disorder.

"What's the deal, Hatfield?" Waymire asked. Jill sat down in a rickety Morris chair and buried her face in her hands. "You think Jeffries stabbed Dunning, even after what I told you about him being out of town at the time?"

Hatfield said, "If he didn't kill Dunning, he knows who did. Regardless, I've got to put Jeffries behind bars before it'll be safe for Jill to show herself on the streets."

She came to her feet, eyes wet with tears. "Mr. Hatfield—be careful. If you could only wait until tomorrow, when Tom gets back from Van Horn with the sheriff—"

Hatfield shook his head. "If I waited until tomorrow, I doubt if either Hamp Dockery or Holt Jeffries either one would be anywhere to be found. Now don't worry about anything, Jill. You'll be safe, as long as you keep under cover here."

Waymire and Hatfield left the room. The Ranger said, "Let me out the back way, Zeke. I want to get into Jeffries' office next door without being seen from the street."

JILL heard the click of Waymire's key in the door lock, the sound of boots on floor boards as Ranger and saloonman moved out into the barroom. She looked around the room. It had no windows, only the one door. If Holt Jeffries' men were hunting for her, she would be safe here. But somehow the four walls seemed to close in on her, making her feel trapped rather than safe.

Suddenly a whisper of sound brought Jill out of the chair with a gasp of alarm. She spun about to face a heavy burlap curtain strung across one corner of the room, concealing a makeshift closet. As she stared, wide-eyed, a hand clutching a sixgun parted the curtains. A heavy-set man stepped out from behind the screening burlap, bared teeth glinting in the rays of the smoky ceiling lamp. Hamp Dockery!

"Looks like Zeke's doing a land-office business hiding people this morning, eh, Jill?"

Jill drew a deep breath into her lungs, opening her mouth to scream, but the ominous click of Dockery's gun coming to full cock paralyzed her vocal cords.

"Holler for help," the newspaperman whispered savagely, "and that Texas Ranger will be a dead man the second he comes through that door, Jill!"

Outside, Zeke Waymire unlocked the back door to let the Ranger out of the Aztec and into the back alley where Karl Dunning had met his death.

"Your only chance to get into Jeffries' office," Waymire whispered, "would be through a window in the back. Even so, you'll have to bust it to get in.

Hatfield checked the loads in his Colt cylinder.

"I'm obliged," he said grimly. "I figure Jeffries will make a bee-line for his office. If he should come into the saloon, could you stall him long enough to slip out and let me know?"

Zeke Waymire grinned. "Always glad to accommodate the law," he said.

As Waymire went back into the saloon, Hatfield headed across the alley and rounded the back corner of the building in which Jeffries had his office. A massive iron door provided the rear exit there, but it was solidly bolted from the inside.

There was a window beside the door,

without bars or shutters or drawn blind. Peering through it, Hatfield saw the interior of a storeroom, lined with shelves on which rested burlap bags of ore samples from Jeffries' diggings.

Removing his stetson, Hatfield held it against the window pane. A single blow of his fist shattered the glass with so little sound he doubted if the jangling reached the street. Then the Ranger was straddling over the low sill into the ore-sample room.

Gun palmed, Hatfield headed for the door and was relieved to find it unlocked. He stepped out into a narrow hallway leading to the front of the building where a glass door gave him a view of Jeffries' front office.

Reaching that door, Hatfield satisfied himself that the office was deserted. Apparently Jeffries had no regular office staff working here at headquarters. The plate glass windows fronting Main Street were covered by green shades.

Hatfield moved into the office. A big mahogany desk was in one corner. Behind it was a frosted glass door marked:

HOLT JEFFRIES, PRESIDENT
NO ADMITTANCE

The front office offered no hiding place. But as Hatfield went around behind Jeffries' ornate desk he saw that the door of the private office was ajar. He went through it quickly, sizing up the interior. This room was given over to filing cabinets and a huge iron safe, as large as that to be found in most cowtown banks; it was labeled:

SEVENTY-TWO MINING CORPORATION

To the right of the vault was a gun cabinet with glass doors revealing a prize collection of neatly-racked rifles, shotguns and other weapons.

"Keep your eye on this bird next to me—I think he's a troublemaker!"

HATFIELD was circling the room when his ears caught the sound of a key grating in the lock of the street door. Moving quickly to the frosted glass office door, he saw Holt Jeffries slip through the street entrance. Hurriedly the man closed and bolted the door behind him.

Hatfield faded back from the frosted door, hearing the swift strike of the mine owner's boots as he headed for his private

office. The sawing of his labored lungs sounded like escaping steam.

The only possible place of concealment in the inner office was a narrow space between the wall and a row of filing cabinets. Hatfield had barely had time to wedge himself into that space and get out of sight when Holt Jeffries shoved open the door and came inside.

The polished glass doors of the gun cabinet mirrored the former lawman, enabling Hatfield to see Jeffries cross over to a small desk, unlock a drawer and lift out a quart bottle of whisky. Uncorking the bottle, the man swigged deeply.

It was obvious from his gusty breathing that he had been running hard. Circling the town, he had boldly crossed Main Street to reach his headquarters. With the holster at his hip empty Jeffries' first move probably would be to arm himself.

Returning the bottle to the drawer, Holt Jeffries crossed the room, coming into Hatfield's direct view. Without glancing in the direction of the filing cabinets, Jeffries knelt down on a deep-piled rug in front of his safe, spun the combination dial, and opened the thick laminated door.

The man's hands shook as if from ague as he unlocked a steel drawer inside the safe. From it he took several sheafs of greenbacks, stuffing the currency into the pockets of his frock coat.

Then, without closing the safe, he came to his feet and headed for the gun cabinet, his back to Hatfield's hiding place.

Hatfield waited until Jeffries had located the proper key from his watch chain ring and was inserting it into the lock of the gun cabinet before easing out from behind the filing cases. He made no whisper of sound, but some primitive instinct in Holt Jeffries seemed to warn the big man of danger, for he left his key-ring dangling in the lock and spun about like a wolf at bay.

"Expected you to come hunting firearms, Jeffries," Jim Hatfield said softly, stepping away from the filing cases. "You can consider yourself under arrest."

The color faded from Holt Jeffries' craggy face, leaving only twin spots of crimson painting his cheek-bones. The heavy slug of whisky he had downed to bolster his shattered nerves was beginning to take hold, accounting for the reptilian shine in the man's eyes. But there was another expression in those hooded orbs—utter and total despair.

"On—on what charge, Hatfield?" Jeffries wheezed.

Hatfield's mouth stiffened. "Several charges. Obstructing a Ranger in pursuit of his duty, let's say. Or if you want something that carries a hangrope, the murder of Karl Dunning twenty years ago."

Holt Jeffries' knees turned rubbery. Hatfield thought the man was going to collapse in a faint. Then Jeffries took two staggering steps and sank down in an office chair facing the Lone Wolf.

"I—didn't kill Karl Dunning. I can prove that."

Hatfield's cold smile mocked the bayed crook. "You'll have your chance to prove it—in front of a jury, Jeffries. I claim you murdered Dunning and got the map of his gold strike. A year later you 'accidentally' discovered gold up Placentia Canyon. The mine you call the Seventy-two was actually Dunning's."

Jeffries stared into the black muzzle of Hatfield's sixgun as if mesmerized. Finally his shoulders stirred in a shrug of resignation.

"You've been listening to Zeke Waymire. You heard that story from him when Hamp and I found you two talking together in the Aztec this morning."

THE Ranger did not affirm or deny Jeffries' hunch. He said, "The moment I rode into town yesterday, Hamp Dockery guessed why I was here. He tried to drygulch me at Dunning's grave. He failed, so he let you know a Ranger was in town searching into a twenty-year-old murder mystery. So you had Shafter jail me on a flimsy pretext. You hired Red Harkness to ambush me when I attempted to break jail. Everything that's happened to me since I hit Tarantula can be traced to you, Jeffries."

Jeffries' hand was massaging his chest. His face had taken on a purple flush which was not entirely due to the whisky he had swallowed.

"I've got a heart condition, Hatfield," he whispered. "I've got a bottle of digitalis—in the safe yonder. If I don't get it you'll have the satisfaction of seeing me dead at your feet—"

Something in the man's tone convinced Hatfield that he was facing a seriously sick man.

"Where's this heart medicine?" he said. "I'll get it for you."

Jeffries gestured toward the open safe. "The brown bottle on the metal shelf there. Hurry, please. I've already had one stroke. Another would—finish me."

Hatfield edged over to the safe and lifted out a brown bottle half-filled with white pills. The bottle was not labeled. He tossed it to Jeffries, who removed the cork with trembling fingers, shook two of the pellets into his palm, and clapped them into his mouth.

The drug seemed to take instantaneous effect. His eyes cleared, his hands lost their tremor.

"Hatfield," he said, "you came here to track down Karl Dunning's killer. I'm going to give you the whole story—or put it into your hands. I won't be here when you find the actual answer to your riddle."

Something in Jeffries' fatalistic tone drew Hatfield up, aghast.

"Those pills—"

Holt Jeffries came unsteadily to his feet. "Strong poison, Hatfield, about as fast as cyanide—and as deadly. Except that it'll take a minute or so for those to dissolve. When they do—I'm beyond your reach. You'd put me behind bars for the rest of my life, Hatfield, with what you'll dig up. I'd rather have it—this way."

Hatfield made no effort to halt Jeffries when the man headed for the vault and sank to his knees before it.

On the alert for treachery, knowing Jeffries might have a derringer concealed in the safe, Hatfield hovered near as Jeffries opened a steel drawer and reached far back into it. But it was not a gun Jeffries removed. It was a folded newspaper tied with a string.

Unsteadily, Holt Jeffries turned around on his knees to drop the paper at Hatfield's feet.

"There's why—I've been silent—for twenty years," Jeffries said. "You'll savvy why—when you read—"

A violent paroxysm contorted his body. An acrid odor was biting Hatfield's nostrils as he stood helplessly to one side and as the dying man toppled sideward against the open door of the safe. It swung before the pushing weight of Jeffries' shoulder and lowered the man's head to the floor.

Another seizure wracked Jeffries' body. His lips were moving and his eyes seemed to be pleading for Hatfield to come closer, to hear what he was trying to say. Hatfield leaped forward, dropping to one knee beside the man.

WITH a tremendous effort Holt Jeffries cawed out:

"Story—in paper. Dockery—held it over me—to save own—hide. Dockery—at the Seventy-two—if he got out of—town."

The whisper faded; the staring eyes were no longer lucid. A rime of foam appeared on lips which were bent in a final sardonic, triumphant smile, the last defiant gesture of a man who had cheated the law by taking his own life.

Thoughtfully silent, Jim Hatfield stared down at the dead face. A fly buzzing on a window pane sounding unnaturally loud to his ears.

Finally he pulled himself back to reality, staring at the sixgun in his hand as if wondering what it was doing there. Then he shoved it into holster and reached over to pick up the time-yellowed, rolled-up newspaper which Jeffries had removed from its hiding place in his private vault.

Retreating from the room of death to the outer office, Hatfield sat down at Jeffries' desk. The front door was barred, so there was no danger of intrusion by any of the dead man's boot-licking cohorts.

Hatfield snapped the fragile string around the newspaper and was starting to unroll the paper when the sound of hoofbeats startled him. Jeffries might have had men coming to join him here at this office! But the riders were out back somewhere, moving away, and the hoof sounds soon died away.

Hatfield turned back to the newspaper. It was a copy of Hamp Dockery's *Tarantula Tribune*, dated July 10, 1873—two full years after the murder of Karl Dunning.

But this was no regular issue of the *Tribune*. It was a special edition. It was, to be exact, more of a proof sheet than a newspaper. The back page was entirely blank. The front carried a banner headline across the full width of the page, with a column of crudely-set type making a dark stripe down the center:

THREE PARTNERS WHO STOLE A DEAD MAN'S GOLD MINE

By Hampson Dockery, Editor

The story which followed was the most incredible and fantastic Jim Hatfield had ever read. It was both a murderer's confession and a blackmailer's instrument of self-protection. It read:

> In cold type, I am confessing the murder of one Karl Dunning, a prospector from San Saba, on the night of July 4, 1871. It was not a well-executed murder, for I was half drunk and allowed it to be witnessed by a well-known Tarantula citizen, Zeke Waymire by name. Another respectable citizen, Sheriff Holt Jeffries, came into the picture as a conspirator later on.
>
> I was watching a poker game in Waymire's Aztec Saloon the night Karl Dunning returned from a prospecting trip. He brought a boot full of gold dust out of the Guadalupes, and bragged that he had made a big strike which he would be recording in the local courthouse as soon as it opened Monday morning.
>
> Shortly before daylight Karl Dunning left the saloon, intending to sleep in Waymire's hayloft. I followed him and stabbed him in the back. I was leaving with Dunning's boot full of dust and the map of his claim when I realized that Zeke Waymire was watching me from the door.
>
> I could have shot Waymire, but like I said, I was drunk. I promised him a half-share of Dunnings' mine to keep his mouth shut. But Waymire told Sheriff Holt Jeffries when Jeffries got back two days later from El Paso.
>
> Jeffries was rotten to the core. I bought my life from him by making him as well as Waymire a partner.

HATFIELD glanced up, staring for a moment toward where the dead man lay. This was unbelievable! Then he read on:

> All three of us knew that I, a tramp printer, and Waymire, a saloonkeeper who never rode into the hills, could not file claim to a gold strike without rousing suspicions that it was Dunning's. So we waited a full year before Sheriff Jeffries trumped up a story about following a rustler into the mountains and stumbling over a gold ledge.
>
> Jeffries resigned as sheriff when he became the owner of the Seventy-two Mine, but Waymire and I were secret partners.
>
> From the first I have known that Waymire and Jeffries might try to get rid of me. To protect myself against being bushwhacked I have taken this means of holding them in check.
>
> Only three copies of this confession were printed. One copy was turned over to Zeke Waymire. The second went to Holt Jeffries. The third is on deposit in a safety box in a certain bank in a certain city, with instructions that in the event of my death, it be opened by an officer of the law.
>
> I believe that Waymire and Jeffries will take good care of my health, knowing they would be exposed as accomplices in a major crime if the third copy of this paper ever came to light. That is the life insurance policy I hold over them.
>
> HAMPSON DOCKERY

Jim Hatfield's heart was slugging with excitement when he reached the end of Hamp Dockery's amazing document of murder and blackmail. There was a fiendish ingenuity back of this method of saving himself from being doublecrossed by his partners in crime.

Suddenly Hatfield thought of something else.

"Jill!" he gasped aloud. "She's at Waymire's!"

CHAPTER IX

Toll Road Trail

WITH a sense of impending disaster goading him, Jim Hatfield unbolted the front door of Jeffries' office and stepped out in full view of Main Street, instead of leaving by the back window. But the street here was deserted. Red Harkness' body over by the courthouse

plaza still held the attention of the crowd. Now two men were preparing to take the dead man on a litter to the undertaker's.

Hatfield raced for the Aztec, and took the porch steps at a run. A man he recognized as the Overland Telegraph operator was sitting on one of the benches beside the door. He nodded, but the Ranger never even saw him as he batted the swing doors open and lunged into the barroom.

The saloon was deserted. Waymire was nowhere in sight. And Hatfield felt a stab of alarm as he saw that the door of the saloonman's private room was partly open. He lunged on into the room, calling Jill Mitchell's name—but the girl was gone! Pinned to the Morris chair where she had been sitting, too prominently displayed to be overlooked, was a piece of paper which had been torn off the calendar on the wall.

Something was written on the paper. Even before Hatfield read it, he was certain it was for him. It was, and it read:

> Ranger Hatfield:
>
> Dockery and me know when it's time to vamoose for parts unknown. We've made our stake in this town. We can't run the risk of calling your bluff that maybe you telegraphed the Rangers to come here. But don't try to find us. The Mitchell girl will die if you do. She's our hostage.
>
> Zeke Waymire

Panic momentarily plucked at Jim Hatfield's nerves. He was remembering the horses he had heard behind Jeffries' office while he had been reading Hamp Dockery's printed confession. Those horses probably had been carrying Jill and Hamp Dockery and Zeke Waymire away from Tarantula.

Numbly, almost like a man in a trance, the Lone Wolf left Waymire's living quarters and went back into the saloon. He was directly responsible for what had happened to Jill. His telling Dockery he had sent for reinforcements from Ranger headquarters had decided those two men on flight. And now Waymire and Dockery held the aces. Any attempt at tracking them down would mean Jill Mitchell's life would be forfeit!

As Hatfield walked out onto the porch he noticed vaguely that men were beginning to head back down the street, talking excitedly. Undoubtedly they were discussing the shoot-out in which Red Harkness had met his death.

Then a voice at his elbow startled Hatfield.

"If you're looking for Zeke Waymire, he rode off."

Hatfield spun around. It was the telegraph operator, idly whittling on a stick, who had spoken.

"You saw him? Which direction did he take?"

The telegrapher gestured with his jackknife in the direction of the canyon mouth.

"Heading for Jeffries' mine upcanyon, I reckon. That's about the only place Waymire ever rides."

Hatfield dragged a sleeve across his sweat-rinsed cheeks.

"Was—was Waymire riding alone?"

The telegrapher shook his head and went back to his whittling as he said, "Our newspaper editor and the girl that helps him were with Waymire. Going after some story or other, I reckon."

A wave of relief swept through Hatfield. At least he had a definite lead on what direction the two kidnapers had taken. The Seventy-two Mine, in which Dockery and Waymire were secret partners, apparently was their destination.

HATFIELD said, "I understand that canyon road has a tollgate? Does that mean the road's closed to traffic?"

The telegrapher shrugged. "Holt Jeffries spent a heap of dinero blasting a road up that canyon. He charges a toll for freight outfits coming to and from El Paso. Saves 'em a long roundabout haul over the desert."

Hatfield nodded, and went down the steps to the street. Crossing over to the courthouse plaza he found Goldy waiting in the stall, saddled and bridled. Only an hour had elapsed since Hatfield had readied his sorrel stallion to ride, but it seemed much longer because of the startling events that had been crowded into that hour.

Riding out of the plaza by way of the

side street which flanked Main, Hatfield did not approach the main road until he was outside of Tarantula. Holt Jeffries could have alerted gunmen to be on the lookout for the Ranger. For all Hatfield knew, any man in Tarantula could be a potential enemy.

He cut over to the wagon road leading to the mine, and within two hundred yards had rounded a bend in Placentia Canyon, and was out of sight of the town.

Not until then did the thought strike him, belatedly, that the telegraph operator could have been instructed to give him false information about the direction in which Jill's abductors had taken her. But a few moments later when he spotted the fresh hoofprints of three horses, traveling abreast up the cayon, plain to read where the deep-rutted wagon road crossed an area of loose blow-sand he knew he was on the right track. The prints were fresh, untouched by wind.

Ahead of Hatfield, the eroded tufa walls of the canyon closed in, the rimrocks fifty feet high, with no side draws breaking the cliffs. This was the logical route of getaway for Waymire and Dockery, if they were intent on getting out of Texas forever. This road led out of the Guadalupes, ending at El Paso; branch roads would lead northward into New Mexico.

The toll house up ahead was a matter of grave concern to Jim Hatfield. Unquestionably Waymire and Dockery would leave orders with the gatekeeper to prevent any trailing riders from following them—especially a Ranger. He unpinned his star and slipped it back into the compartment in the lining of his cowboot.

Hatfield had covered roughly two miles when an elbow bend of the cayon brought him in sight of a massive log gate blocking the wagon road. A sign had been smeared on a flat boulder off the road with a tar brush:

TOLL GATE AHEAD
RIDERS $1, WAGONS $5
SEVENTY-TWO MINING COMPANY
AFTER DARK, RING BELL FOR
GATEKEEPER

The Lone Wolf reined Goldy around and retreated behind the bend of the cliff. The fifty yards between him and the log gate might be a death trap, if he rode up in the open.

Dismounting, he ground-hitched his stallion in a brushy covert out of sight of the tollgate. Then, checking his guns, he burrowed into a hedge of spiny tornillo brush flanking the road and worked his way back around the bend in the canyon.

From this concealment he spotted the tollkeeper's shack—a rock and mortar cabin built in a rincon hollowed out of the north cliff, fifty feet away from the tollgate.

Keeping to the brush, Hatfield worked his way stealthily toward the tollkeeper's shack. The gate was fastened with a logging chain and securely padlocked. The hoofmarks of the three horses he was trailing continued on past the barrier, plain to see in the oblique rays of westering sunlight streaming down the canyon.

Hatfield had worked his way to within twenty yards of the gate when his screen of thickets petered out. Up to now, he had seen no sign of life around the shack. Was it possible that the tollgate was untended, and that mine employees like Red Harkness had their own keys?

PICKING up an apple-sized chunk of quartz, Hatfield hurled the stone over the roof of the shack, striking the cliff behind it. The rock clattered down on the roof tiles and fell to the ground.

Instantly a man appeared in the doorway, clutching a double-barreled shotgun. The tollgate tender was a half-breed wearing a coffee-colored sombrero and a parfleche jacket.

Shotgun poised, he glanced around tensely, seeking to determine the source of the noise. When his attention shifted to the road down-grade from the gate in the direction of Tarantula, he froze in an attitude of listening.

Stepping clear of the tornillo thicket, Hatfield sent his warning shout across the distance:

"*Maños altos,* hombre—drop the gun and get your arms up!"

The gatekeeper whipped up his buckshot gun, then froze again as he caught sight of the stranger in cowbog rig stalking across the open road, sixgun in hand. Hatfield thought for a moment that the *mestizo* was going to make a play with the shotgun. But then the weapon clattered from the man's hands and he stepped back to brace himself against the rock wall of the cabin.

Coming in fast, eyes fixed to the big revolver holstered at the gateman's hip, Hatfield reached out with a booted toe and kicked the shotgun aside.

"You unlocked the gate just now for two men and a girl, señor?" Hatfield demanded, reaching out to lift the six-shooter from the 'breed's belt.

The gatekeeper's leather-brown face was as impassive as an Indian's.

"*No sabe Ingles,*" he mumbled.

"Then I'll talk Español," the Ranger snapped in Spanish. "Waymire and Dockery and the señorita are ahead of me?"

The half-breed licked his lips, keeping his arms elevated before the menace of the gun in Hatfield's fist.

"Si. They ride up to the mine often, amigo. Why should I stop them?"

"How far is it to the mine?"

The gateman shrugged. "Twenty miles, I theenk."

"Waymire left orders for you to gun me down if I showed up, didn't he? That's why you were on guard with the Greener?"

A reptilian glitter lighted the 'breed's eyes.

"No *sabe*," he mumbled.

Hatfield stepped back. He was wasting precious time with this guard.

"Open the gate! I'm riding through."

The 'breed hesitated, then reached over to the door casing and took down a massive key hanging from a nail. Without a word, he headed for the gate.

Putting fingers to his lips, Jim Hatfield blew a sharp whistle. Before the guard had trundled the massive log barrier open, Goldy came trotting around the bend of the lower canyon. Before the stallion had reached the spot, Hatfield beckoned the guard over to him.

"The toll ees one peso, señor—"

"I can't have you on my back trail," he said. "This is a job I've got to do, amigo."

Recoiling from the uplifted gun in Hatfield's hand, the *mestizo* gave a wild shout and turned as if to sprint for the cabin. The Ranger's down-clubbing .45 struck with a muted cracking sound.

Knocked cold, the half-breed spilled face-down on the ground. Hatfield thrust his Colt into leather and turned to pick up Goldy's trailing reins. In saddle then, he spurred through the opened gate.

Some of Jeffries' gun crew might be coming up-canyon from Tarantula this afternoon, but it would be useless to lock the big gate against them. Right now, the Lone Wolf's task was to cut down the lead which Jill Mitchell's kidnapers held.

THE wagon road through Placentia Canyon led upward at a steady grade as it penetrated deeper into the Guadalupe badlands. Urging Goldy to a gait faster than a trot would only mean exhausting the horse before they could reach their destination. The three horses he was trailing could not travel any faster than Goldy.

Within the hour the sun's light no longer streamed into the rocky gorge. In the dimming light, Hatfield saw occasional mile markers painted on the cliff walls, for the benefit of wagoneers using this toll road. By the time the full dark had come to the malpais outside the rimrocks, Hatfield still had eleven miles to go and had seen no traces of the riders he was trailing.

He pushed on, well aware of the possibility of riders on his back track, riders who would have revived the unconscious *mestizo* at the toll gate and learned that a stranger was ahead of them. They would have no trouble identifying that stranger as the Ranger who had been the cause of ructions in Tarantula.

Goldy was showing signs of tiring as the grade steepened. The ribbon of sky showing between the beetling rimrocks of the cliffs on either side was dusted

with stars. An invisible moon reflected its silver light on towering pinnacles and crags outside Placentia Canyon.

And then, during a halt to give Goldy a breather, Jim Hatfield heard vagrant sounds borne downcanyon by a soft wind. The clang of a hammer on an anvil, the dull reverberations of a mine's stamp-mill working through the night, crushing ore.

Seventy-two mine could not be far ahead.

Another quarter of a mile, and Placentia Canyon's walls spread apart to give Jim Hatfield a moonlit view of a vast semi-circular amphitheater gouged out of the heart of the mountain. A deep cleft at the far end of the rock-girt bowl revealed where the El Paso road went on through. Clustered lights marked the windows of mine buildings here and there against the ebon backdrop.

Vague shapes took form as Hatfield's eyes became accustomed to the eerie witchglow of the moon. The skeleton of a tipple hoist, with wheels and cables moving as ore was hoisted from the depths of a shaft; the sheetiron roof of the stamp-mill, with great tentacles of rock tailings sprawling from its walls.

Another row of lighted windows marked a tarpaper-walled shack almost a hundred feet in length, which Hatfield assumed to be a miners' bunkhouse. Smoke rising from the chimney of another outbuilding, and the clattering of tin dishes from within told where the cookhouse was located.

Hatfield dismounted on the road and led Goldy off into the darkness of a gully between two heaps of tailings. Waymire, Dockery and Jill, he thought, could not have arrived here more than thirty minutes ahead of him, perhaps less. He was sure their horses could not have maintained the grueling pace he had exacted of Goldy tonight.

Hatfield told himself, They've got to stop at the diggings long enough to get fresh horses and some supper in their bellies. Maybe they'll stop overnight.

Skirting the edge of the tailing heap, Jim Hatfield worked his way toward the lighted windows. The reverberating thunder of the stamp-mill would obliterate the crunch of his boots on broken rock.

Somewhere in this lost pocket in the Guadalupe hills, Jill Mitchell was a prisoner, a hostage. This place swarmed with miners who would need little excuse to shoot a prowling stranger on sight. The least mistake here, like showing himself in a patch of light, could be fatal.

AVOIDING the brighter lights of the bunkhouse, Hatfield headed along a row of workshops on his left. Suddenly he caught sight of a man in a white jacket and white cap heading toward him from the cookhouse—a Chinese carrying three dish-covered trays balanced on a board.

Hatfield thought, Grub for three from the messhall. Three people who don't want to be seen in public.

The Chinese was heading up an alley behind the shops, toward a row of small shacks set apart from the others—the living quarters of foremen, most likely. In front of one of the shacks the Oriental halted, rapping on the door with a sandaled foot.

Hatfield, invisible in the darkness fifty feet away, saw the door open, saw the silhouette of a heavy-set man accept the three trays. "Have the hostler saddle up three fast broncs, Woo Chung," the voice of Zeke Waymire reached the Ranger's ears, saying. "We're riding out in an hour."

The Chinese made a sibilant reply and shuffled away down the slope. The door closed as the saloon keeper from Tarantula moved back into the tarpaper shack which probably was Jill Mitchell's prison.

CHAPTER X

Shoot-out at Seventy-Two

JILL sat on the edge of the miner's cot to which she was tied and picked

half-heartedly at the food which a Chinese camp cook had brought over from the company kitchen. She was exhausted, but terror had paralyzed her appetite.

For Jill, the long flight up from Tarantula today had been little short of a nightmare. She had known her life was in danger the moment Hamp Dockery had made his appearance in that room of Zeke Waymire's in the Aztec Saloon. She had been convinced of it when Waymire had come back inside the room and Dockery had snarled at him:

"Why didn't you put a slug in that Ranger's guts?"

Waymire, packing a pair of saddlebags, had retorted:

"Why didn't you use your own gun when I led him in here? I'm not tangling with the big feller. I'm lighting a shuck for Juarez where I got my share of the mine profits banked, Hamp. You coming with me or not?"

Hamp Dockery had turned to Jill. "I'm coming with you, Zeke. And Jill's going with us. Long as we're holding a woman's life forfeit, he ain't so apt to come chasin' us."

And so the long ride had started, on horses which Waymire and Dockery had saddled in the Aztec barn.

Reaching the Seventy-two Mine after dark, her abductors had brought her straight to this shack, which had been the living quarters of the dead shafthouse foreman, Red Harkness. Jill doubted if anyone at the mine was aware of their arrival, or of her presence here at least. When Dockery had left the shack to stable the horses, Waymire had remained in the front room, as her guard.

Then that Chinese cook had brought food for the three of them.

Waymire and Dockery she realized, were taking no chances that their victim might escape. Her legs were tied securely to the frame of the cot; one arm was trussed behind her back, leaving her with one hand free with which to use her fork and spoon.

From the front room she could hear Hamp Dockery saying to Waymire:

"Once we hit Juarez, Zeke, reckon we'll be separating for keeps. But I forgive you for spotting me the night I stuck a bowie in old Dunning's ribs. She's been a mutually profitable partnership, even with Holt Jeffries putting on all the dog. Reckon I've even forgive you for letting the sheriff in on the deal . . . wonder if Hatfield will cash Holt's chips?"

Jill could not hear Waymire's grunted, monosyllabic reply. She caught a tinkle of glassware. Dockery was pouring himself a drink.

"It's been a long trail for me since I got mustered out of Jeb Stuart's army," Dockery was saying after a moment. "I cut a carpet-bagger's throat down in Encinal after this Yankee took over my newspaper plant. Had to go on the dodge. Wound up in Tarantula."

Waymire's voice came through the flimsy partition. "Always figured you was on the dodge, Hamp. Ain't news to me."

Dockery laughed thickly. "Jim Hatfield knew I was wanted for killing that dam-yankee in Sixty-seven. Got to hand it to them Rangers. They never give up."

Jill was lifting a tin cup of coffee to her lips when suddenly she froze. She had been staring at her woe-begone reflection in the window of Red Harkness' bedroom, and at this moment another face blended with her own mirrored image. The haggard, sun-bronzed face of Jim Hatfield! Like a figment out of a dream Jim Hatfield was peering through the dirty glass from the alley alongside the building.

She expected to see the image fade, but Hatfield was lifting a finger to his lips, warning her to be silent. Choking back a scream, Jill nodded, signifying that she had seen him and understood. And then, like a wisp of steam dissolving into thin air, the Lone Wolf's face faded from the window.

TREMBLING violently, the girl set her coffee cup back on the tray. The voices of Dockery and Waymire in the front room still beat on her consciousness, unintelligible sounds.

Was her imaginatioin tricking her?

Was it possible that Jim Hatfield could have followed them up from Tarantula?

Long minutes passed. And then a tiny metallic sound drew the girl's eyes around to the back door. The knob was being turned, with infinite slowness. If that door was locked—

An icy draft struck Jill's cheek. The door was opening inch by inch. A man's spurred boot appeared. Then Jim Hatfield, sixgun jutting from his fist, stepped into the bedroom and closed the door noiselessly behind him.

Jill gestured frantically with her free arm toward the connecting door to the room where her abductors were eating supper. Jim Hatfield crossed the room in three strides, lifting a bowie knife from a sheath at his belt.

"Took quite a while to scout the layout, Jill," he breathed, the razor-honed blade slashing the lass'-rope with which Dockery had tied her arm behind her. "I want you to go out through that back door and wait—"

Her leg bonds were severed then and he was helping her to her feet.

Jill whispered in panic, "Come with me—let them go! Don't try to arrest them. This whole mine is an armed camp!"

Hatfield pulled her toward the door, opened it, then they were out under the stars in the Stygian blackness behind the Harkness shack.

He pulled her to him, his lips close to her ear as he whispered, "Why didn't you tell me your real name, señorita, when you knew I was working on your father's murder case?"

"You—you know I'm Karlita Dunning? But how—"

Hatfield laughed softly. "Just a hunch, I guess. Your mother told me you were away at school, that you wanted to be a newspaper woman. It finally occurred to me who Jill Mitchell must be, as I was riding upcanyon this afternoon."

The girl's face was moist with tears. "Yes, I grew up with the mystery of Dad's death preying on my mind. As soon as I could, after I graduated and was on my own, I had to come to Tarantula to find out what happened to him. But I never got any further than that story in the Eighteen-Seventy-one file."

"You should have told me who you were, Karlita. Why did you keep it secret—at the *Tribune* office yesterday, later at the barn, on our way to hide out at Waymire's saloon?"

The girl he had known as Jill Mitchell whispered, "I gave Tom my word of honor I wouldn't. He thought you killed that marshal, that you weren't to be trusted."

Without warning, Hatfield slipped away from her and back into Harkness' bedroom. He had heard another door open, and saw Hamp Dockery on the threshhold, saying:

"We're riding in ten minutes, Jill. Once we get safe acrost the Rio Grande we'll turn you loose. Until then—"

Dockery broke off, eyes widening in shocked disbelief as he saw the Lone Wolf standing at the back door.

Jill's safe, Dockery. Raise your arms."

With a choked oath, Hamp Dockery clawed for the sixgun at his belt. Behind him, old Zeke Waymire had just caught sight of Jim Hatfield standing beside the empty cot.

Dockery's gun was a blur of blued metal in the lampshine as he made his desperate draw. With cold precision, Jim Hatfield tripped gunhammer twice, saw his slugs hammer a semicolon in the center of the zigzag scar which slanted down across the printer's jutting brow.

"I'm taking you in alive, Zeke!" Hatfield grated, even as Hamp Dockery fell backward against the saloonman's paunch. "Get your arms up, fast!"

FOR an oldster, Zeke Waymire's draw was incredibly fast. But the crash of his gun sending a slug into the flimsy wall behind Hatfield was swallowed up by the Ranger's third shot.

Dead on his feet, a gout of blood staining the center of his greasy shirt, Zeke Waymire was toppling down over his slain partner as Jim Hatfield turned in a

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The Panimint Kid let the guns fall

Ex-Sheriff

By CHARLES A. STEARNS

THE agent, attending the sound of distant hooves, cocked his head so that the sun shone through his celluloid visor, making his face a ghastly green.

"There she rolls," he said. "I swear, Newt must be laying it into that team. He's thirty minutes ahead of time."

A Concord rounded the bend, swaying and rocking upon its thoroughbraces, and Buck Hafely got his carpet-bag and went over to wait by the side of the road.

Two days ago, back in Jungo City, he had been Sheriff John Hafely, a man respected and feared. Now it was plain

Sometimes even a man like Buck Hafely couldn't tell the good from the bad — till the chips were down

Buck Hafely.

It seemed a lot longer than two days since he had stood before the desk of Jungo's new mayor and got his walking papers. But he had had a long ride, and time for plenty of bitter thinking.

"I want you to know that this is none of my doing, Buck," the mayor had said, "but Jungo City is growing up and getting to be respectable. We've got a town council now, and the council has nominated its own man for the office of sheriff, come election day."

"In other words," Buck had growled, "now that the dirty work is finished, one of your local politicos wants to step into my shoes and collect the easy money."

"Now look here, Hafely. Two years ago Jungo City hired you as a special officer at a high salary. We needed a fast gun then, and a man who could control the gambling element. Now that we're clean, the council doesn't want your brand of gun law any longer. However, all of us are grateful for what you've done, Hafely. There's a bonus of one thousand dollars in this envelope. Take it and we'll shake hands and call it square."

And Buck Hafely had known that every word of what the Mayor of Jungo City said, was the truth. He had always been a journeyman sheriff, whose gun and guts were for hire in whatever town bid the highest for his services. In fifteen years he had set up office in a dozen different bailiwicks, and Jungo City had lasted as long as any.

THE big trouble was, they didn't understand that Buck Hafely was not the man he used to be. His reflexes had slowed. His nerves weren't reliable any more. When he dreamed at night, like as not he dreamed of dead men, and in the morning his hand shook as he drank his coffee. He was an old man, at thirty-six. That was what this kind of life could do to a man.

But something else had happened to him in fifteen years. He had started out a hired gunslinger, excitement hungry and not yet dry behind the ears, but gradually, through the experience of years, he had acquired a genuine regard for law and order. And even though the rep of gunslinger had followed him and shaped his life, this other thing had grown and flourished until all that he knew or cared about was the law, and all that he hated was invested in the breaking of the law, and the disregard for civil rights.

He couldn't make them understand that he now was as opposed to gun law as they were. It hadn't made any difference. They didn't want him in Jungo City, even as a private citizen. A man with his reputation brought glory-seekers hundreds of miles to meet and "try" him. A man like Buck Hafely attracted trouble wherever he wandered.

But that was all right with him. He had come to hate Jungo City, and the politicians who were taking over the West. Many of them were greedier and more depraved than the lawless men who had come before them. When he'd thrown the silver badge upon the mayor's desk, he had made up his mind it would be the last one he'd ever wear. There was still wide-open territory where a man could settle down. There were plenty of places where folks had never heard the name of Buck Hafely. . . .

He had chosen to meet the stage at McClarenville. Through this tough little mining settlement passed the famous Spanish Trail, leading northwest, giving the Apache country to the south a wide berth until it crossed the Sierras.

The squalid village of McClarenville was huddled beneath the face of a mountain, and there was considerable racket in its main and only street. The stagecoach driver, climbing down for a stretch, swore it either must be a pay-day, or a half-holiday for the miners.

Hafely threw his carpet-bag on top of the coach and climbed in. There were two other passengers. One was a sinister, bushy-browed man in a flat-crowned hat and shiny serge breeches and coat of different shades of black. When he nodded to Hafely, his reddish eyes had a frightening, bulls-eye glare.

The other man was an upper-class tenderfoot. His bowler was immaculate.

So were his tailcoat and tie. Only his boots were Western.

He might have been west of the Mississippi for the first time in his life, the son of a wealthy Bostonian, going West for his health and morals. He did not stoop to the usual amenities, but stared out the window instead.

The agent and a red-headed youth came swiftly and unobtrusively out of the station, carrying a box which they lashed upon the after rack. The stage-coach settled a little. The red-haired boy, carrying a twelve-gauge shotgun and a Springfield, climbed to the driver's seat. Hafely realized that they must be sending out a bullion shipment, but doubted that either of the other passengers had noticed.

A man came riding hell-for-leather from the mining settlement, waving his hat and yelling at the top of his voice.

He dismounted, fell flat on his face and got up by using a stirrup. He was fairly drunk.

"Hold 'er, Newt!" he said. "You got yourself another passenger."

"Damned if I want the likes of you," the driver said.

"Not me, Newt, a lady. Only she's no lady, by hell. The constable is bringing her down. They'll be here directly."

"She must be a doozie," the driver said. "I sure never figured McClarenville had so many women it could afford to run one out of town."

WHEN the woman arrived she brought quite an entourage of jeering hangers-on, and a few well-wishers who wanted to fight the hangers-on and the constable. Apparently they, like the stage-coach driver, believed the town could ill afford to lose a member of the fair sex.

"This here is Rosie DeVore," the constable said. "She'll be traveling with you as long as fifty dollars worth of tickets holds out."

"Hop in, ma'am," the driver said. "We'll be right glad to have you, if you behave yourself."

The door opened and a small, pointed shoe with a trim ankle met Buck Hafely's gaze. His eyes followed the ankle, and he got the surprise of his life.

Rosie DeVore didn't meet the ordinary standards of beauty of the saloon hussy which held out in the gold camps. These were always ribald, dirty, painted and broad-hipped women whose rouge could not cover their veteran complexions. Rosie was a slender, well-formed blonde. No longer in the flush of youth, nevertheless she had a fresh, genteel beauty. She wore a black dress with a panier, and a bodice whose shirred front modestly flattered her breasts. She looked like nothing so much as a lady schoolteacher who has found herself, by mistake, on the wrong side of the Continental Divide.

The men tipped their hats. She started to sit down. The coach lurched and she fell against the sinister, ory-eyed man, and then against Hafely, who caught her arm and helped her to a seat.

The sinister man smiled at her and glared at the same time. The glare was something he couldn't help.

"I hope you are well this splendid morning, Miss DeVore," he said.

She inclined her head slightly, and rather coldly.

He was not entirely rebuffed. "I am Dr. Smiles," he said to Hafely, "and I see no reason why we cannot be friends, so long as we must travel together."

"None at all," Hafely said.

Dr. Smiles turned back to Rosie. "The name, of course, is merely a *nom de theatre*. I am in the patent medicine business, you know."

"I saw your trunk on top," Hafely said.

"Ah, yes. But I happen to have a dozen bottles of my elixir in my valise." He opened the case between his feet and took out a brightly labeled bottle. "There you are, sir. Sunshine Tonic. It is one of the happiest scientific discoveries in our age of marvels. It is not an old Indian remedy—indeed, not. You can get those from the Indians. Sunshine Tonic cures grippe, catarrh, ague, flux, gout and dropsy. It will even alleviate the pain and ferocity, so I am told, of attacks of hydrophobia."

"It may be good," Hafely said, smiling

in spite of himself, "but I don't need any." He handed the bottle back.

"I was only about to ask two dollars the pint," Doctor Smiles said. "How about you, miss?"

"No, thank you," Rosie DeVore said faintly.

"Sunshine Tonic is especially effective when used as a specific for intestinal disorders, and especially water qualm," Doctor Smiles said. "Would you believe that most of the ills which our race is heir to originate in the bowels, Mr.—"

"Hafely," Buck said. "John Hafely."

The hours passed. The sun rose blisteringly hot in the sky. They changed teams twice, and when they stopped at a waystation for lunch, seventy miles was behind them.

By four o'clock that afternoon the elevation was changing. The air was cooler, and they passed the summit of Hog range, a low, dry line of barren peaks.

THIS was new country to Buck Hafely, but apparently old stamping ground to Dr. Smiles. He leaned out of the window, pointing toward a dry lake twenty miles below them. It shimmered in a heat haze.

"There, my friends," he said, "is Dead Horse Flat, where the temperature often is one hundred and twenty in the shade, with no shade. We'll pass through there about dusk if we're lucky."

"Indian country?" Hafely asked.

"Even the Indians don't want it," answered the "doctor." "However, there is a place on this side of it called Caddo Wells. Once the stage line had a station there. It was abandoned when they found that Caddo Wells happens to be located on an arterial route into the Strip, and is therefore frequented from time to time by renegade Piutes and white men who make them seem, by comparison, like red angels. There is a sheepherding family living there now. A hardy breed, sheepherders."

"Will we stop there?" Rosie DeVore asked.

"Not we, my dear," Dr. Smiles said. "This is the Panamint Kid's territory. He and his band of cutthroats have been known to hole up near Caddo Wells after a killing, a robbery, or a bank holdup."

Rosie shivered a little. Dr. Smiles moved a little closer to her.

The tenderfoot had been paying close attention. "Do I understand you to say we're in danger?" he said.

Dr. Smiles rolled his fierce black eyes. "We may be lucky," he said. "Or—" He made a suggestive gesture across his throat with his finger. "You are not afraid, are you?"

"Not me," the tenderfoot said.

"I never did catch your name," Dr. Smiles said.

"It's Williams. Robert Williams."

"Well, Mr. Williams, we'll be through Caddo Wells and Dead Horse Flat before you know it. Then you'll have nothing to worry about."

Dr. Smiles took a package of tobacco from his pocket and began to roll himself a quirly. Then he hunted for a match. He tried two or three pockets. He began to slap his pockets and sides rapidly, like a performing seal.

He said, "Someone is trying to be funny."

"What's the matter?" Hafely said.

"I've been robbed. My pouch is gone. So are my watch and wallet. Yet I am certain that I had them when I got on this stage."

Buck Hafely remembered something that had happened at McClarensville, and had a premonition. He felt his own coat pocket. His wallet was gone. He looked across at Rosie DeVore. There were twin red spots in her cheeks.

"Why did they run you out of McClarensville, Rosie?" he asked.

"I—I don't know what you mean."

"Wasn't it because you're a live wire—a pickpocket? If you hadn't been lifting pokes, they'd never have let you go. The miners expect to be rolled, but they hold picking pockets as downright unfriendly. I knew what you *weren't*, Rosie, and so I ought to have guessed what you were. Now hand the things over."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she repeated.

"Maybe you'd like to be searched—intimately."

She opened her purse and handed him his wallet. From her pocket she took Dr. Smiles' watch, and found his poke beneath the shirred lace of her bodice. Also a roll of bills.

"You lose anything, Mr. Williams?" Hafely asked.

"No. No, nothing." The tenderfoot seemed nervous, and kept looking out of the window.

Dr. Smiles began to count the bills. "Just a minute," he said. "There's ten dollars missing."

"I haven't got it," Rosie DeVore said. "I didn't touch your roll."

"I'm afraid I will have to search you," Dr. Smiles said, and he drew her near him with one strong arm. She struck at him vainly.

BUCK HAFELY hated thieves. He didn't feel sorry for her. Not exactly, but there was something about the knowing way that Dr. Smiles was pawing her that made him see red.

"Turn her loose," he said.

"I'll thank you to attend to your own business," Dr. Smiles grunted. "I intend to teach this little vixen a lesson she'll not soon forget."

Buck Hafely simply leaned over, grabbed Dr. Smiles by the shirt front and smashed his head against the back of the stage wall. He twisted the cloth. Dr. Smiles face began to purple. He struggled, but he was as helpless in that iron grip as Rosie DeVore had been in his.

"Please!" he strangled. "You're crumpling my collar, Hafely. I see your point!"

"Good," Hafely said pleasantly, and let him go.

"I suppose I must have miscounted my roll," Dr. Smiles said. "I owe you an apology, Miss DeVore. You too, Hafely. You see, I have just now realized who you must be."

"What do you mean?"

"The print of a recent badge is on your vest. You sir, are Buck Hafely, the famous gunfighter."

The tenderfoot, Williams, jumped as though he had been branded by a hot iron. For a moment it seemed that he would jump out of the window.

"Don't worry, my friend," Doctor Smiles said to him. "Mr. Hafely always fights on the side of the law and, if I may say so, in behalf of damsels in distress—on either side of the law."

Rosie DeVore was bestowing a look of gratitude upon Hafely. He didn't want her gratefulness. She was a thief, and all of his life he had despised that breed as the lowest form of criminal life.

From nowhere, the young shotgun guard's red head appared, upside-down, in the window near Rosie DeVore's head.

"Dust storm blowing up at the south end of Dead Horse Flat," he said. "It looks like a bad 'un. We may have to spend the night at Caddo Wells, folks."

By the time they reached the flat, a haze had obscured the sun. Caddo Wells first appeared as a shadowy clump of scrub cottonwoods, then they could make out the old stage-coach station which had lost its door and most of its shutters. The sheepherder's hut, on the slope of the mountain, could be dimly seen in the gathering gloom.

Newt, the driver, set the brake and climbed down. Up ahead a wall of yellow dust already had shut out the western peaks. The driver was little, scrawny, an irritable and worried man. Nothing, apparently, made him so mad as getting behind schedule.

"Well, my good man," Dr. Smiles said to him, "I suppose you're about to tell us that we must sleep in that miserable hovel over there."

"I wouldn't know about sleeping," the driver said. "I calculate that the air around here will be thick enough to irrigate and raise us a lettuce bed in a few minutes. If she passes over in a few hours, and it's moonlight enough, we can go on. On the other hand, it might last a couple of days. There used to be a bench in the stage shack. You can cut cards to see who gets it. The shotgun guard and me will stay in the coach."

The tenderfoot, Williams, suddenly spoke up. "It seems to me that you and

the guard are getting the best of it," he said. "The stage-coach is dust-tight, while that open shed will be little better than out-of-doors."

"You could be right," the driver said grimly. "All the same, that's how it's going to be. There ain't room in the coach for all of us, and *we* got to stay with the bullion."

"You're carrying gold?" Dr. Smiles exclaimed.

"That we are, but we don't advertise the fact none . . . Chuck, you hand that strong-box down to me and we'll put it inside. Easier to watch it there, and I figure it'll be easier to guard here than in the station."

HAFELY got out, stretched, and started toward the old station.

"Wait a minute there, Hafely," the driver said. "I hear tell you're the man that was sheriff of Jungo City, and cleaned up Snow Mountain and a lot of other towns a few years ago."

"What of it?"

"We're in a bad fix. There's fifty thousand worth of pay dirt in that box. Word of these shipments always gets ahead of us, someways, but so long as we keep a-moving, we're mostly all right. There're Piutes in these hills watching, though, and the minute we stop, every outlaw and renegade Injun in the Strip will get the word. I'd take it kindly if you stayed here to help us guard the bullion."

Buck Hafely hesitated. His mind went back three days ago, to Jungo City. He could remember a time when they had come to him begging for help in Jungo City, too.

"Sorry," he said. "It's your lookout, not mine."

The air, as Newt had predicted, was soon heavy with dust. By this time it was prematurely dark, and the driver had lighted a lantern to hang from the ceiling hook in the old stage-coach station.

Williams paced up and down, pausing now and then to wipe the sweat-dust mixture off his face with a bandanna.

Rosie DeVore sat on the bench with her handkerchief to her face, coughing now and then. There was alkali dust on her cheeks. She seemed to be in considerable distress.

At last Hafely went over to her and said, "There's a well up on the hill. Give me your handkerchief, and anything else of cloth that you can spare, and I'll take them and dampen them for you. It helps filter the dust."

Dr. Smiles was still standing outside the door, gazing up at the light burning in the sheepherder's hut. He was coughing and spitting, miserably.

"Why don't you go inside?" Hafely said.

"I wasn't sure I'd be welcomed," Dr. Smiles said. "I mean, after that incident in the coach this afternoon."

"Forget it. We're all in this together."

Hafely made his way up to the well. He drew a bucket of murky water, tasted it, and spat it out. He wet his own bandanna and tied it around his nose and mouth, soaked the other handkerchief and started back.

A boy was standing in the path behind him with a rifle. He was no more than ten or twelve, skinny and ragged, and his long hair left his face deeply in shadow. They surveyed each other in silence for the space of half a minute.

Then the boy said, "You're off the stage-coach. Ain't that right?"

"That's right. What can I do for you?"

"I was coming down to talk to you. It's about the baby. We live up yonder on the hill, and she is pretty damn sick, Carrie Ann is. She's only six months old, and I don't know what to do, hardly. I wouldn't be surprised if it was tyfard fever, because that was what took Ma off last week, and Julie had it, and so did I, but I'm better now."

"Let me get this straight," Hafely said. "You live in that sheepherder's shack. Your mother is dead, and you've got a sick baby. Where's your father?"

"Pap, he left us more'n a year ago. I wouldn't be surprised if he got drunk and killed somebody and got hung. He was mighty mean when he was drunk, Pap was. He was meaner than my brother, Lafe."

"I'll be up right away," Hafely said.

"You get out of this dust now. Go back to the cabin and wait for me."

I'M that used to the dust it don't bother me hardly none. It's only for Carrie Ann that I'm asking this. The rest of us can make out, but I don't know about Carrie Ann. Maybe you could take her into Carlinville on the stage with you and find her a doctor. I wanted to stop yesterday's stage, but Lafe, he wouldn't let me. He give me forty dollars, though, to ride over to the Indian post and buy grub."

"Where's your brother now?"

"Oh, off somewheres in the Strip, I guess. He don't like to say where he is going, much."

"He doesn't sound like much of a man," Hafely said grimly.

"I guess you wouldn't say that if you know who Lafe McClaine really was."

"Well, who is he?"

"You're not a marshal, are you?"

"I'm a private citizen."

"Well, my brother, Lafe, is the Panamint Kid. . . ."

"The Panamint Kid!" exclaimed Dr. Smiles, when Hafely had told them about the boy. "It makes a good deal of sense, if you stop to consider that this is known to be in the vicinity of the Kid's hideout. If that family is the Kid's, it explains how they are able to survive. The range is next to worthless, even for sheep. What do you intend to do, Hafely?"

"There is a sick infant up there," Hafely said. "Possibly others. We've got to do something for them. I'm going up to see what can be done."

"It may be a contagious disease," Dr. Smiles said. "Possibly even smallpox. We've only the word of that boy that it is typhoid."

"If you're afraid," Rosie DeVore said, "you can wait here for us."

Hafely looked at her in surprise. "I didn't know this was in your line, Rosie?"

"I never had a kid," Rosie said. "I'm not sure I ever wanted one, but a man is hardly the person to take care of a baby."

Dr. Smiles shrugged and picked up his valise. "I may as well tag along, then," he said. "After all, I am the only medical man in our little group. Are you coming, Mr. Williams?"

There was a curious expression on William's face. The dust made a chalky pallor of his lean jaw.

"I'll stay here," he said. "I wouldn't care to antagonize the Panamint Kid. I understand he's a pretty tough hombre."

The sheepherder's cabin was a dugout, twelve by twenty feet, with a tow-sack curtain hung up in the middle to divide the kitchen from the sleeping quarters. There were six of the McClaines, counting the boy who had talked to Hafely, all younger than that boy, and all badly in need of a bath.

Dr. Smiles, his Machiavellian face grim, bent over the baby's cradle. He snorted. "Doesn't look like typhoid to me," he said. "But the child is very weak. You there, boy, what's your name?"

"Jed," the boy said. "Jed McClaine."

"Well, Jed, what have you been feeding your baby sister since your mother died?"

"We've got two goats, but Pap always said to starve tyfard fever, and that's what we've been doing."

"Get some milk out of those goats and heat it at once," Dr. Smiles said. "That old theory is as dead as the dodo." Then, to Hafely and Rosie, he added, "You may be surprised to learn that I actually went to medical school once, for four months. If you'll be kind enough to open those bottles of Sunshine Tonic and pour them in the water bucket—"

"You expect that to help?" Hafely said.

"Not the disease. But it may prevent the other children from getting it. This is probably an intestinal disorder occasioned by bad water. The water in that bucket has an absolute stench. Sunshine Tonic is made exclusively out of pure spring water, with a bit of licorice added for color and body."

HAFELY was beginning to revise his opinion about Dr. Smiles. The man was undoubtedly a quack and a scoundrel who took advantage of women, but he could be businesslike and practical when the need arose for it.

As for Rosie DeVore, he saw that she had managed to find ingredients for mutton stew, which likely would be the first square meal these waifs had had in a long time.

And it struck him that of the three of them he, alone, was unable to be useful. This man and woman whom he had despised as adventurer and thief, respectively, had set to work with an efficient disregard for danger and discomfort. The three of them, he now realized, were outcasts, each in his own way. But only Buck Hafely had nothing to give to the world in return for his repatriation.

He stole a glance at Rosie. She was holding the baby in one arm, and she knew how. Her hair was in her eyes and her face was covered with the chalky dust. Nevertheless, she was a handsome woman, and he was seeing her—really seeing her—for the first time.

"Confound it," Dr. Smiles said. "What's keping that boy? He could have milked a dozen goats by this time."

Even as he spoke there was a scuffling sound outside the door. The boy, Jed, came in with a rush, as though someone had shoved him. He looked scared.

A youth of nineteen or twenty came in behind him. He was tall and skinny, with a sallow face. He wore a Mexican-style sombrero and a black, Spanish outfit from head to foot. He glittered. He held a long-barreled Colt in each hand.

"Don't anybody make a move," he said, "or I'll gut-shoot him."

"Don't do it, Lafe!" Jed cried.

"You shut your mouth. I told you a hundred times to keep away from strangers. I told you a hundred times not to bring anybody here. Now I got to take care of them, and when it's done, I lay I'll hide you within an inch of your life!"

"You're pretty tough, aren't you?" Dr. Smiles said. "You're not exactly what we expected, however."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"We didn't think the famous Panamint Kid could be so young."

The Panamint Kid gave a sudden, vicious kick that sent his brother, Jed, sprawling. "That'll learn you to gab about who I am," he said. But he looked pleased.

Then Dr. Smiles made what seemed to Hafely a colossal blunder. "I suggest that you clear out of here," he said. "You can't hold us here, and you can't shoot all of us."

"Can't I?" snarled the Kid.

"No, you can't. You may consider yourself lucky to leave here alive. The man you're bracing happens to be former Sheriff Buck Hafely, one of the fastest men you'll ever live to walk away from."

The Panamint Kid sobered. "No joking," he said. "Are you Buck Hafely?"

"That's my name," Hafely said.

"I'll bet you're not so good."

Hafely shrugged.

The Panamint Kid laughed nervously. He began to walk back and forth, eying Hafely from all angles. There was a growing excitement in his pale, blue eyes.

"You don't look like so much to me," he said. "If I could take you, that would make me a big man, wouldn't it?"

"I thought you already were a big man," Dr. Smiles said.

"That's right. Say, you better be quiet, or I'll let you have one in the breadbasket right now. . . . Go on, Hafely, if you're so brave. Draw down on me!"

"You've got the drop on him," Dr. Smiles said. "That would make you a real big man."

The Panamint Kid laughed again. It was not a pleasant laugh. "I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll lower my guns. Then you draw."

ONE of the little girls was crying.

"Hush Julie up there!" the Kid said. "Julie, you hush up that crying and get in bed. All of you go to bed."

He walked over to the door. Deliberately, slowly, he let his gun-barrels sag until they were pointing at his boots.

"Come on, Hafely," he taunted.

Buck Hafely knew, the moment his hand snaked to his holster that something was wrong. His reflexes were fairly fast. They had already taken over before he pulled the trigger. All that he could do was to pull the shot a little, so that it

smashed into the boy's shoulder instead of his heart, hurling him against the door.

As for Lafe McClaine, alias the Panamint Kid, he didn't even have his guns up yet. Those big .45's had been mostly ornamental.

Lafe's young face was twisted in pain and fear. Seeing death, as he believed, in Hafely's face, he let the guns fall to the floor.

"You're no gunfighter," Hafely said. "You never will be. You couldn't possibly be the Panamint Kid. Why did you pretend to be?"

The boy was shaking hard.

"Answer me!"

"I work with the Kid's outfit. They—they let me be their lookout. I only pretended I was the Kid around home, so that everybody would look up to me, and mind what I said."

"Where is the gang now?"

"On their way here. We was supposed to lay over for the stage over in those buttes on the west side of the Flat. We knew it was carrying gold. When the storm got bad we came back here. I come a little ahead of the others, but they'll be here. Then you'll see!"

"What about Mr. Williams and the driver and the guard?" Rosie said to Hafely. "They've got to be warned right away."

"I'm on my way. Lead the way, McClaine."

"I can't. My shoulder hurts. Besides, if the Kid finds out I told you, he'll kill me!"

"Do exactly as I say, and you won't get hurt. Otherwise, I'll see that you hang with the rest of them."

Lafe shivered, but he opened the door and went out, with Hafely close behind him. The dust was worse now, but it was better that way. It would make it harder for the outlaws to find the station.

They made their way down the hill. The pale light of the lantern from the stage-coach station shone through the murk at last. The wind was fierce and hot; the dust and sand stung their faces.

They were within fifty feet of the station when a figure suddenly appeared in the doorway, and stood looking out. It was Williams.

Lafe gave a sudden outcry. He threw up his hands and ran toward Williams.

"It's a trap!" he screamed. "Look out!"

Williams dived behind the door and fired twice. Lafe McClaine doubled up in the dust.

"Let that be a lesson to you, you no-good, doublecrossing sheepherder!" Williams growled.

Hafely hit the dust, cursing. He should have guessed that Williams was the Panamint Kid. He'd seen a circular once. All of the way from McClarenville the man had looked vaguely familiar to him.

Newt, the stage-coach driver, stuck his head out under the flap that covered the Concord's window. "What's going on out there?" he said.

A bullet from William's gun smacked into the window near his head, and he went back inside like a turtle into its shell.

There was a yell from the vicinity of the well, and three men came spurring down upon the stage-coach. The rest of the Kid's gang had arrived, and they lost no time in comprehending the situation.

CAUGHT in a crossfire, Hafely crawled for the corner of the stage-coach shack. He took time for one shot. One man toppled from the saddle, but the other two had reached the coach and were firing into the windows.

A bullet suddenly exploded the sand within an inch of Hafely's face. A second one creased his shoulder-blade before he had time to roll aside. Williams—or the Panamint Kid, as he was now revealed to be—had circled the shack and come up behind him. If it hadn't been for the low visibility, Hafely would have been a dead man.

He, himself, unable to see because of the sand in his eyes, fired at movements, not knowing whether he made a hit or even came close.

After a moment his vision cleared a little, and he decided to raise himself to the level of the window and look in. If the

Kid crawled past the door opposite, he would reveal himself.

Apparently the Panamint Kid had had the same idea. As Hafely elevated himself, the Kid appeared in the other window. Hafely's bullet struck the window sill where the Kid's .38 was resting and spun it out of his hand. At the same time his own gun clicked on an empty cartridge.

The Panamint Kid heard it and grinned. He swung a leg over the window sill. "Come on inside, Hafely," he said, "and we'll settle this man to man."

"Delighted," Hafely said.

The Panamint Kid waited until he was half into the station, and couldn't back out, then he smiled a wicked smile.

"Never trust a tenderfoot, lawman," he said.

He put his hand to his boot. Then a startled expression came over his face. He thrust the hand deeper, then withdrew it. "That she-devil!" he howled. "She took it! She took my hideaway."

Without waiting to listen to his vain regrets, Hafely doubled up his fists and started to work. It didn't last long. . . .

When Buck Hafely returned to the shepherder's cabin he found that Dr. Smiles had put most of the meagre furniture in front of the door and established himself with Jed's rifle behind the barricade.

Both he and Rosie appeared relieved to see Hafely alive. Rosie was feeding the baby warm milk.

"Is it all over?" Dr. Smiles asked. "I had hoped to draw a bead on at least one."

"It's over. One of the gang got away. The McClaine boy is dead, and so, I'm sorry to say, is the shotgun guard. Newt, the driver, is carrying lead, but the Panamint Kid, who turned out to be none other than our fellow-passenger, Williams, will live to hang."

"Williams!" Dr. Smiles said. "I can't believe it."

"You're hurt," Rosie said to Hafely. "Take off your shirt and I'll have a look."

"It's only a scratch. But Newt will stand some patching up. Dr. Smiles can go down and take charge of the prisoner. I don't think he'll be any trouble. Meanwhile you and I, Rosie, have got a few things to talk over."

Dr. Smiles had apprehensively gone. The baby was sleeping and seemed much better. The other children were in bed, silent as scared mice, except for Jed, who stood by the window, thoughtfully staring down toward where Lafe had died.

IT MUST have seemed to Jed, Buck Hafely thought, as though death and destruction had come to live with them for good. First his father had gone. Then his mother. Now this. It was all wrong.

"Somebody has got to help them," Rosie said. He turned around to study her.

She flushed. "I know what you think of me. I'm a thief and a no-good. But I was a kid once, and I grew up like this, and I know what it means. My mother died when I was twelve. I never knew my father. We came to Santa Fe. I had to grow up in a man's world with a choice of only two professions. Oh, I met a man, once, but he turned out to be a skunk. Then I took to lifting pokes. These little girls might grow up like me."

Or Jed might grow up to be like me, Hafely was thinking. But all he said was, "The only thing I'm thinking about you, Rosie, is that you could be fine and decent, if you had a chance. And you're mighty pretty, too." He took her hands. "I'm not much good at saying, 'I'm sorry for what I said and thought about you,' but you and I could take care of these kids, Rosie. We're a lot alike, and between us, we've made all the mistakes there is to make." He felt uncomfortable, and his collar was choking him. "What I mean to say, Rosie, is if we—"

"Are you trying to propose to me?" Rosie said.

That stumped him.

"Because if you are, here's my answer."

And after awhile, as they were standing there, tight together, with his arms around her, Rosie gave a little cry of pain. And she put her hand to her bosom and removed the Panamint Kid's .32.

After that, it was better. ● ● ●

Young Hamp Snyder had some big boots to fill, but was he man enough to fill them?

LYNCH HIM

BY JOHN JO CARPENTER

THEY pulled up just outside of town—eight riders on horses wearing the queer Kentucky Twist brand, a Figure 8 with three loops instead of two, like a twist of home-cured tobacco. It was still some little time before moonrise, and the lights of the town shone yellowly ahead of them.

Big Bill Townsend took the play clear away from young Hamp Snyder, who had

just inherited the Kentucky Twist. Big Bill had ramrodded the spread for Hamp's dad. He was a hard-faced old hornback who had been around since Territorial days, and who had dandled young Hamp on his knee.

"Remember," he said, "no shooting unless they start it, but if they do open up, hit hard and fast and often. We take no lip from nobody—understand? We take Morley Jacobs out of that damn jail whether or no."

"We get it, Bill," one of the Twist hands muttered for all.

Young Hamp cleared his throat. Just nineteen, he had spent most of his life with his mother, down in the south end of the state, and had barely known his dad. They'd been separated since Hamp was a baby, and now the old Twist hands who had a fanatical loyalty to the old man's memory still were not sure whether they liked the son.

"I dunno, Big Bill," Hamp said, "whether we're going at this the right way or not. Seems like we ought to give the law a chance to give Morley a fair trial."

"You don't think he's giulty of that shooting, do you?" Big Bill said heatedly.

"No, I sure don't, but—"

"But what? The law don't aim to turn him loose! The sheriff is a Circle D man. This is just the opening gun in a move to run the Twist out of business. Blessed hell's angels, Hamp, Morley works for you! Do you aim to let them hang him?"

"No, but—"

"Then let's get him out of that jail!" Big Bill said stridently. "Trial be damned—the law be damned! It's Clem Knox's Circle D law, and no Twist rider ever got a fair shake from it."

THE six riders muttered angrily, but young Hamp said, "I heard the governor sent a new judge up here—Lyle Congreve. If he's the Lyle Congreve my mother knew, he'll see to it that Morley gets a fair trial."

"If he gets the chance," Big Bill said explosively. "Which he won't. Blessed hell's angels, you don't think Clem Knox is going to let a Twist man get a fair shake, do you? Look here—I've known Bob Honeycutt a long, long time—years before he was elected sheriff. He ain't got a yard of guts in his fat body! You wait around for Judge Congreve to turn Morley loose and he'll turn loose of a dead man, that's what!"

"All right," said Hamp, "I'll go this far with you. If it don't look safe for Morley, we take him out. But if the new judge is Lyle Congreve, and if he promises us a fair trial for Morley, we talk it over again."

"But—"

"You heard me!" young Hamp snarled, in the voice of a youngster who is not quite sure of himself. "First I talk to Judge Congreve. Is that clear?"

Big Bill looked over Hamp's head at the crew. He said, "All right, we play it your way," in a voice that left no doubt as to how long he was willing to play it that way.

They trotted on into town. It wasn't much of a town, Blue Butte, but it served a lot of rich cow-country and it was a money town. In it was a saloon with the longest L-shaped bar in the world, and a hotel with a marble-top desk. During the shipping season it cost a dollar a night to sleep on a pool-table with a perfect stranger.

Time was when Blue Butte had been a Kentucky Twist town, the law just something in the books downstate, and justice was old Jud Snyder's personal idea of right and wrong. He could enforce it, too—which he had, until he got too old and sick and his iron hand weakened.

That was when Clem Knox moved in and bought the run-down Circle D and started branching out. Clem was a lawyer, and he had money to lend. Behind his back, they called him a loan-shark, a land-grabber, a legal thief. But despite all these names Clem Knox's power increased as Jud Snyder's declined.

Clem knew the governor. Clem saw to it that county lines were laid out, elections held, a courthouse built. Oh, he

was strong for law and order, was Clem Knox. Especially if he could elect a Circle D man sheriff.

Which he did. Bob Honeycutt had once owned the Circle D himself until he made the mistake of going to Clem Knox for a loan, instead of to the bank. There was a lot of truth in what Big Bill Townsend said. Now all Bob Honeycutt owned were a few acres of range without a building or a well on the land. He needed the sheriff's pay, and Clem Knox's water for his few head of cows.

He was Clem Knox's man. But out of young Hamp Snyder's childhood memories he recalled old Bob as easy-going, good-natured, a man who liked kids and who'd spend hours teaching a small boy to braid a pair of horsehair reins, or whittle a willow whistle. If times had changed while that boy had been downstate with his mother, his memories had not.

Riding on into town, the Twist crew dismounted and tied in front of the saloon. There were quite a few horses at the hitch-rail, considering it was only Monday night. Couldn't tell much from their brands. The Circle D was such a conglomeration of old bought-up brands, and its crew such a nondescript bunch of drifters that brands didn't mean a great deal.

One thing was sure—there were no Twist horses there when the Kentucky Twist crew arrived, and not a mount that could be identified as the property of anyone friendly to the Twist. But the men tied and went inside anyway.

BEHIND the bar, Hamp saw Newton Corleer, who once had borrowed money from old Jud Snyder to send his sick wife to a better climate. Hamp thought he could count on Newt.

A stud game was in progress in one corner of the big room. All strangers to Hamp. They looked up quickly as the Twist outfit filed in. They looked down again.

Big Bill Townsend marched his crew up to the Bar. Big Bill stood six-four, and weighed two-ten. He was sixty-one years old, but could still shoulder four sacks holding two bushels of barley each and throw all four of them up on an overhead platform. He towered over skinny little Hamp Snyder like a three-story building.

Bill flung some silver down on the bar.

"Whisky, Newt," he said. "Or ain't the Twist welcome to liquor up in here?"

Newt was a hump-backed old man with a stiff arm. A wild-horse hunter once, he had been thrown five or six times too often and now he got around behind his bar with the sidling gait of a long-legged new-born colt.

"Everybody's welcome, Bill," he said mildly, "if they got the money. And sometimes if they ain't."

He set out a bottle. They drank. Hamp hadn't learned to like the stuff yet, but he had a drinking crew here, so he downed his without water. Then he eased on down to the other end of the bar and picked up some old funny-papers laying there.

In a minute or two Newt came wiping and polishing his way down the bar, just as Hamp had thought he would.

"Little crowded in town for a Monday," said Hamp.

"A mite," Newt agreed, polishing away.

"Could be most of those poker sharks yonder are Circle D rannies, I reckon?" asked Hamp.

"I couldn't be sure of that," said Newt.

"Hear the new judge is in town." Hamp tried a new tack.

"Heard that, too." Newt nodded.

"To hold court tomorrow."

"Not tomorrow. He's just setting up a docket. Will be back next month to hold court."

"Maybe," said Hamp, "there wouldn't be no prisoner for him to hold court over, in one case?"

"Well," said Newt, "you hear things. Again, maybe they ain't all true. Me, I stay out of trouble."

That was all Hamp wanted to know. All he needed to know. That was as far as he expected Newt Corleer to go out on a limb.

Big Bill was right, then. The Circle D did not intend for Morley Jacobs ever to come to trial. Hamp leaned there against the bar for a moment, trying to think what to do next.

Morley Jacobs was the newest, youngest Kentucky Twist hand. He'd come in for a job the day Hamp had come up here himself to claim his inheritance. Hamp hadn't hired him, though—Big Bill Townsend had. Because Bill had claimed he could see fire in Morley's eyes, that he could look ahead and see the need for hired hands with fire in their eyes. Big Bill didn't have to wait to be drenched to know when a storm was coming.

The Twist outfit still didn't know exactly what had happened last week that had ended with Morley in jail. There had been shooting, they knew, and a Circle D man was dead because of it. The only eye-witness had been a Circle D man, but a few days later he had been thrown from a horse out at the Circle D and had died of a broken neck.

Morley claimed that the man who had been shot had started the ruckus. He admitted that the other Circle D man had tried to prevent trouble, but that the trouble-maker had been drunk and had gone for his gun. None of the rest of the Circle D men had actually seen that happen. There had been only that one eye-witness—and now he, too was dead: Killed, Morley claimed, because he couldn't stomach the job he was expected to do.

MORLEY had told Big Bill, when the Twist ramrod had seen him in jail, that the Circle D had forced the man whose neck had been broken to tell a false story. When he had recanted, he had been killed for his pains.

"He didn't die of no broken neck!" Morley had insisted from the darkness of his jail cell. "He was murdered because he wanted to tell the truth, that's what! He saw I had to go for my gun in self-defense, and when he thought it over he wanted to tell just what did happen!"

It was all muddled up, but Hamp Snyder was pretty sure there wasn't enough of a case against Morley Jacobs to convict him, with the sole witness dead. He could hardly believe, though, that any man, even Clem Knox, would deliberately murder a witness who wanted only to tell the truth.

Hamp had never met Clem Knox, and didn't particularly want to, still it was hard to believe any man was a cold-blooded murderer. It was hard to believe a lot of things.

But one thing Hamp did know—he was going to find out if the new judge was the Lyle Congreve he knew about, and not even Big Bill Townsend was going to prevent that. He walked down the bar toward where the Twist crew were pouring their second round of drinks.

"Be back in a few minutes," he said. "Keep your noses clean till then. And for Morley's sake, don't dip them too deep into that tanglefoot."

He went out. Big Bill Townsend followed him onto the sidewalk.

"Don't know as them fellers cottoned much to you telling 'em not to liquor up, Hamp," Bill said.

"Don't know as I care whether they did or not," said Hamp. "What we got to do, if we got to do it, can't be done by a passel of soaks. I'll hold you responsible, Big Bill. Keep them sober enough to know what they're doing."

Hamp knew that giving such an order himself, and Big Bill giving it were two different things.

"I'll keep 'em sober," Big Bill vowed. "What you aim to do now?"

"Mosey around and look things over. Stay out of trouble till I get back."

He walked off and left Bill Bill standing there. Big Bill had run the Twist a long time all by himself, during all those years that old Jud Snyder had been sick. He wasn't used to taking orders like Hamp had just given him.

It was pitch dark as Hamp headed for the new frame courthouse at the other end of town. He walked past darkened stores, past the livery stable where lanterns glowed. A voice from inside the

stable hailed him.

"Hey, young feller! Are you Hamp Snyder?"

Hamp turned. "Guilty," he said, "but I don't think I could put a handle on you."

A tall man, taller even than Big Bill Townsend but lean and lithe as a whip, came out of thes stable. His skin was as dark as an Indian's, but even in the gloom Hamp could make out that his eyes were a strange, pale blue, startling in such a swarthy face.

"The name," said the lean, blue-eyed stranger, "is Knox, Clem Knox. Been wanting to talk to you a long time, son. There's a lot of hard feelings between your men and mine, and there's no sense to it—no sense at all! You and I ought to get along together."

"Yes," Hamp said. He shook hands. The feel of Clem Knox's palm was damp and clammy. He did not like the sensation the contact gave him.

Knox went on, "Now this wild rider of yours that's in jail—no sense in him having to stand trial. Of course we've got enough on him to swing him, but—"

"Ain't what I hear," Hamp cut in.

"Well," said Knox, jovially, "you heard wrong. No hard feelings about it, but your man is going to have a long, crooked neck that won't do him no good, if he goes to trial. Yet to make peace I'd rather see him just skip out of the country. Why stir up bad blood, is what I say."

HAMP said, "I'm listening."

"Your dad and I had unnecessary hard words."

"I'm still listening."

"You got a thousand acres of swale-grass that I've been ready to buy from you at a fancy figure for years and years. You don't need it—I do."

"There's a difference of opinion on whether I need it or not," said Hamp, "but I'm still listening."

"I offered your pa six thousand cash. I'll up that to sixty-five hundred, and to show we're friends, I'll ask that the murder charge against Morley Jacobs be dismissed so's he can get out of the country."

Hamp spat between his teeth. He wiped his palm on his pants leg because he could still feel the clammy dampness of Clem Knox on it.

"In the first place," he said, "that piece of swale is worth a hell of a lot more than six-fifty an acre. In the second place, even if we turned Morley Jacobs loose, he wouldn't leave the country."

"He would if you saw to it that he did," said Knox.

"And in the third place," Hamp said, his temper slowly boiling over, like oatmeal on a high fire, "the money ain't been coined that you could buy Twist land with, and the sheriff ain't been badged that could swing a Twist man. Clear?"

"Clear," said Clem Knox. He kept on smiling but the expression in his pale eyes somehow changed.

"Now we understand each other," said Hamp.

Knox chuckled. "Young feller," he said, "don't trip over that gun you're packing. Don't fall down and stub your toe. You want to grow up to be a big, healthy man, don't you?"

Hamp walked on. He wished now that he had kept his temper. He always thought of things to say too late. He knew he'd been made to look like a brassy brat, and it made no difference that no one had overheard it.

A lamp burned in the sheriff's office in one corner of the courthouse. Hamp went in, smelling the new-lumber and new-paint smell that signalized the arrival of the law in Blue Butte. In the sheriff's office a fat man sat snoring in a swivel chair with his black hat over his eyes and his feet up on the desk.

Hamp, still edgy with temper, lifted a foot and kicked the sheriff's feet off the desk. Old Bob Honeycutt almost fell over, swivel chair and all. He sat up, grabbed for his hat, and swung both fists, fighting something in his dreams.

Then he suddenly came wide awake, and grinned. He said, "I'll be dad-blamed, if you ain't the spitting image of your dad, Hamp! I'd know you anywheres. How come you ain't been in to see me, son?"

"Because," Hamp said, "You're a damned cowardly Circle D skunk now, that's why."

The sheriff's good-natured face turned red. "Aw, Hamp, that's no way to talk to an old man!"

"They aim to lynch Morley Jacobs and you know it," Hamp gritted.

Bob Honeycutt looked down at the floor and licked his lips. His fat fingers trembled.

"You hear things," he said, "but we ain't never had a lynching here, and I just don't believe the folks in Blue Butte would do a thing like that, son."

"The folks that will do it ain't Blue Butte folks," Hamp said in a hard voice. "Clem Knox fetched his own men. You know that."

"Well—" Old Bob said uncertainly.

"I want to see Morley," Hamp said firmly.

Bob shook his head. "Can't do that. They's a rule the prisoner don't talk to nobody, Hamp."

SWEARING at him, Hamp started started back through the dark hallway leading away from the sheriff's office. Bob Honeycutt followed him, complaining loudly. Out of the darkness at the end of the building came an edgy voice. "Who's there? Who is that?"

"It's me, Morley," Hamp called back. "How they treating you?"

He heard Morley's sigh of relief, then his quick rush of words. "Don't light a lamp, Hamp. They'll snipe me through the window if you do! Get me out of here, Hamp! Where's Big Bill and the boys? Why don't they take me out of this jail before I get strung up?"

Hamp's blood ran cold. Morley Jacobs had always shown as much nerve as anyone Hamp knew, but that had cracked badly now, what with his sitting here in the dark jail and cringing from the light.

"You ain't going to hang," he promised grimly.

He could see Morley dimly, clinging to the bars, and trying to keep from twitching.

"You swear that, Hamp?" the young rider pleaded. "You won't let 'em lynch me?"

"I'll be lynched first, Morley," Hamp assured him. "Shake on it."

He took the youthful waddy's hand and squeezed it. He heard Morley almost sobbing. It made a man think, to have the power to bring that kind of peace and relief.

He went back to the office, with Bob Honeycutt following. The sheriff looked sheepish and troubled.

"He's been taking on all day about being lynched," the lawman said. "He's just scared himself to death about it, that's all, sitting there in that dark cell."

"I ain't so sure," Hamp murmured.

There were some things a man didn't need to be told in so many words. Sitting in that dark cell the way Morley was now, *he* knew. After all, Big Bill had been right. The Circle D—Clem Knox, to get down to cases—never intended for Morley Jacobs to come to trial, and Hamp knew it. How he knew it he could not say, but he did.

"Bob," he said to the sheriff, "if the Circle D tries to take Morley out of jail, what'll you do?"

Bob Honeycutt turned a little white. He looked down at the floor, twisting his fat fingers together. "Nobody takes my prisoner away from me," he finally muttered.

"Suppose I bring in six or seven men for you to deputize so you'll be sure that don't happen?" offered Hamp.

"I don't need no help, and I ain't taking sides in no dad-blamed range war!" Bob said angrily. "Get out and leave me be, Hamp Snyder!"

Hamp grabbed him and shook him. "You fat fool, face up to it!" he snarled. "The town's full of Circle D toughs and they're here for just one purpose—to take Morley Jacobs away from you and hang him! When they get here it'll be too late for you to holler for help."

Old Bob insisted squeakily, "Nobody takes my prisoner!"

No use talking to the old sheriff. He

was scared stiff. He knew he was in a tight, but all he was doing was hoping, praying, that if he just didn't look at it, it would go away.

Hamp shoved him back against the wall and growled, "All right, Bob, fair warning. If anybody takes the law into their own hands, it'll be the Twist. So if your friends from the Circle D show up, who do you think will be in the middle?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," said Hamp, "that if Morley Jacobs *does* stretch rope, you'll be wearing a hemp necktie ten minutes afterward!"

"But Hamp, I only—"

Hamp turned and stalked out. The fat sheriff trotted after him, down the steps, and down the brick walk to the street.

"Son," he pleaded, "I don't want trouble, and there won't be any trouble, believe me! I took an oath to prevent just that, and anyway this ain't a hanging town. Hamp, I was your dad's best friend. Don't go making things tougher for old Bob, son."

HAMP snarled something at him, and the sheriff went dejectedly back to his office.

Hamp hesitated on the dark street a moment. He didn't like the feel of things. There was no sound anywhere. Even the coyotes in the hills seemed to have sensed that this was a night to keep their mouths shut.

He strolled back to the saloon and peered in. His boys were still leaning against the bar, making their second drinks stretch. Big Bill was keeping the gang sober.

The poker game was still going on but there seemed to be no great interest in it. Hamp shook his head worriedly, and went back to the hotel.

"Let me see your register," he told the clerk.

The hotel had a Knox mortgage on it. The clerk had been brought in from out of the state somewhere. He was a town boy, and didn't think much of this cow country.

"Who wants to see it?" he said, and went on shining his nails against his sleeve.

Hamp reached across the counter and slapped him—hard. On the spur of the moment. It just seemed that somebody had to pay for a lot of nerve-grating, and this yellow-complexioned pup came handy.

"Let me see your book," he repeated, not raising his voice.

The clerk shoved the register around and Hamp ran his finger down it until he came to the name Lyle Congreve. Congreve was in Room 202. He pushed the book back and looked at the clerk.

"The name," he said, "is Hamp Snyder."

"What about it?" the clerk said, rubbing his cheek.

"Just remember it, that's all. I'll be up in Room Two-o-two for awhile. See that I'm not disturbed or I'll come back and mate that other cheek to the same shade of red."

He went up the steps and knocked on the door of 202. A small, white-haired, gnarled man with spectacles on the end of his nose opened the door, keeping his place in his Bible with his finger.

"Judge Congreve?" Hamp asked.

"Yes."

"My name is Hampton Snyder," said Hamp.

The judge smiled and threw the door open. "Yes. I ran into your mother down at the Springs last week and she told me to look you up here. Well—well, come in and help an old man pass away a dull evening!"

Hamp went in. "Judge," he said at once, "this is a business call: I believe you've got a murder case on your docket, fellow by the name of Morley Jacobs."

"Well, yes." The old judge's face became impassive.

"He works for me."

"Hampton," the judge said sternly, "you know I can't discuss a case I'm holding for trial."

"Judge," said Hamp, "I've been here a few weeks and I've learned that the two ends of the state are somewhat different.

The rules that work down where I was don't seem to apply up here."

"The same law covers all counties, all people."

"But in a different way."

"I debate that."

"And while you debate it," said Hamp, "some interested parties will lynch the prisoner you're to try. I want to take him home with me. I'll produce him at trial time, but I don't want that yellow-bellied sheriff responsible for keeping him alive."

The judge shook his white head. "Can't do it, even for you—I might say especially for you, since there is a personal relationship. Murder is not a bailable offense. What evidence do you have that a lynching is threatened?"

Hamp could only look baffled. Evidence? He had none—just Morley's queer intuitive fears and Big Bill Townsend's foxlike judgment, and his own uneasy hunch. And he knew better than to present them as any kind of evidence.

"I know," he said stubbornly.

THE JUDGE took a worn, scarred silver dollar from his pocket and handed it over. Hamp took it wonderingly.

"This," said the judge, "is a good-luck piece your father gave your mother the day they became engaged to be married. In the bad feelings between them, your mother never lost this nor gave it away. She asked me to hand it to you when I saw you. She says it brought your father good luck and will bring good luck to you."

Hamp let the dollar slide into his pocket. "Thanks, but what about my man Jacobs?"

"He'll get a fair trial."

"If he shows up for it."

"Talk to the sheriff," the judge said in a tone of finality, "or bring me evidence that the sheriff is unable to protect the prisoner and I'll make other arrangements. Meanwhile, the orderly process of the law will be observed. The governor took me out of retirement to see that this newly-organized county began its career in the right way. You don't think I'm going to start by turning over a murder suspect to you, do you?"

No use talking to this man, either. Hamp should have known that. He had heard a lot about Lyle Congreve. In his youth he'd been a tough little hellion who held court with a .44 on the desk and a .25 derringer up the sleeve of his robe. He'd gone into the office of a mine down south and taken a prisoner out at the point of a gun, with all the gun toughs the mine could hire standing around looking helpless.

Nerve he'd had, and a deep sense of justice, and a deep knowledge of the law as well. But he was seventy-five years old now and he'd lived in a law-abiding community too long. He had helped tame the south end of the state, and had forgotten what a young, wild country was like.

No, there was no use talking to him, but Hamp said, "What if the lynch was pulled in reverse? If we took our man out of jail and kept him for you?"

"There would be two trials instead of one," the judge said softly, his eyes glinting. "No one tampers with the integrity of my court, young man."

"If your prisoner shows up dead, I suppose your court's integrity still stands up?" Hamp yelled at him.

The judge pushed him firmly toward the door. "Good night. I can forgive much in a young man, but not impertinence. I shall tell your mother I saw you, but please don't presume on her friends again as you have on me. Good night!"

Hamp went clumping down the stairs, feeling the weight of the silver dollar in his pocket. He took it out and looked at it by the lamplight at the desk. It was a very old dollar and it had deep scratches on it, but it had lain in one place a long time and had not worn smooth. By the light of the flickering lamp he examined the scratches. There were his parent's initials—"J.S. and E.F."—cut in by the point of old Jud Snyder's pocket-knife twenty-odd years ago, when Jud had been a wild, hard-fighting youngster, and Em-

ma Fields a young schoolteacher new to the territory.

He heard someone running down the board walk and let the dollar slide into his pocket. The pasty-faced clerk dropped down behind the desk until only his hands showed, gripping the marble top. Someone came stamping up the steps and threw the door open, and there stood huge Bill Townsend.

"Damn it, Hamp, come on!" Bill roared. "They moved out the back way. Went out one at a time and we stood there like dummies and let them get away."

"Who?"

"Them poker players. We seen them just as they got their horses from in front. They cut our horses loose. Blessed angels of hell, they're going to lynch Morley Jacobs and we're afoot!"

HE WENT charging out. Hamp ran after him. The other Twist hands were already storming down the street ahead of them, toward the jail.

Hamp could hear Bob Honneycutt's shrill, scared voice yelling:

"Keep your distance—keep your distance! No visitors at night. Rule of the jail."

Horsemen were clumped together in the street in front of the courthouse. It was too dark to make out faces, or even to identify shapes, but identification was not necessary. The Twist crew knew.

One of the horses was without a rider. Hamp was just sore and maybe a little scared until he got close enough to see the blaze face on that horse. Then he kind of went crazy.

Hand it to the Circle D for gall! They had taken Hamp's own horse for Morley. They were going to put Morley up on the horse of the man he worked for, put a rope around his neck and throw the other end of the rope across a limb.

They'd quirt that Twist horse, make him jump and leave Morley dangling! There would be no trial, no justice, no law—nothing but insulting laughter everywhere the story was told. To hang a Twist man would be bad enough; to do it from the saddle of a Twist horse was a deliberately indignity.

Yes, Hamp Snyder went a little crazy. He saw lean Clem Knox on the steps, apparently trying to help the sheriff. He was begging the men not to lose their heads and do something they'd be sorry for.

Clem had to live here tomorrow. He couldn't be a party to a lynching. He had to make it look good. The men who were holding that Twist horse with the empty saddle had bandannas over their faces. They were just good citizens meting out justice in the old vigilante way. They were just seeing to it that a killer didn't escape vengeance.

And Clem Knox's rising voice was saying:

"Think, men! Let the law take its course. We're civilized folks. You can't just take a man out and string him up. That's the law's job, and this has to be done legally!"

"Get out of the way, both of you, or you'll maybe get run over!" came a strident shout in answer. "Sheriff, lay your keys down on the steps and your gun with them, put your hands up and start walking away."

Bob Honeycutt licked his lips. "No," he said.

"Please, men," pleaded Clem Knox, "don't put this stain on your souls! Don't do a thing you'll be sorry for tomorrow."

He looked around just in time to see Hamp Snyder coming at him. His hand dropped to the gun at his hip. Hamp caught him in the guts with his fist. Clem doubled over and grunted, but got the gun out just as Hamp caught him in the face with his knee and sent him staggering backward.

Out in the street guns were blazing crazily as Big Bill Townsend and his boys cut loose on the would-be lynchers. Inside the jail Morley Jacobs was yelling, too, but not in terror. Action was what Morley needed. The long wait had not quite cracked his nerve—just bent it a little.

"Give me a gun, Sheriff!" came his

booming voice. "Give me a gun and let me out of here, and I guarantee nobody hangs me. I don't want protection—just a gun!"

"Blessed angels of hell!" came in that deafening roar of Big Bill's voice. "Fog 'em, fog 'em! Nobody stands up to the Kentucky Twist! We come from the Bluegrass and we're hard to curry!"

CLEM came to his knees, then to his feet. He had dropped his gun, his eyes were hazy, and he still was out of breath, but maybe he'd gone a little crazy, too. He had waited a long time to take over things here, and for a long time old Jud Snyder had stood in his way. Then when Jud got sick, Clem had begun to move, and when Jud died Clem thought the time had come for his big play.

And it had, only here was this locoed son of Jud's and his locoed Twist riders busting in as though they had a right to. Yes, Clem Knox *was* a little crazy himself, as men become when they want too much too badly for too long a time.

He lurched down the steps, his powerful arms out, searching. Hamp stepped inside them and pounded away with short rights and lefts, feeling the long arms closing around him. He kept chopping long after his own breath had been squeezed out as he had known it would be, because Knox had greater strength than he had, as well as greater reach, weight, and height.

Clem Knox's odd pale-blue eyes were full of insane rage, but Hamp felt the man's arms weakening. He kept pounding away. When Clem went over backward on the steps Hamp knew he had his man licked.

The first thing he saw when he turned around was Big Bill Townsend searching Bob Honeycutt, looking for the jail keys. Old Bob had his hands up and they were trembling fit to fall off. Bill couldn't find the keys on him anywhere.

"I threw 'em off into the bushes to keep the lynchers from getting them," Bob was babbling. "Look for 'em over there."

"To hell with the keys!" Big Bill yelled. "Snake them bars out by the roots, boys! Blessed angels of hell, Hamp . . . Look out!"

Hamp whirled on his heel and saw Clem Knox scrambling for the gun he had dropped on the courthouse steps. Hamp lost his balance and started to fall backward as Clem got the gun and began pumping lead as fast as he could pull the trigger.

Hamp did not even know he had his own gun out until he heard it hammering away. He stumbled, and lit on his back, hit hard and went rolling down the steps. But instinctively he knew he had only been bruised. He had been lucky, a lot luckier than Clem Knox.

Clem dropped his gun and began spitting blood. He fell forward slowly across his gun and began rolling down the steps. And Hamp Snyder knew then the sickness that comes from having killed a man.

He staggered off into the bushes and was sick, and through it all he heard Big Bill Townsend yelling orders at the boys. They put a rope on the window bars, hooked it around a saddle-horn, and pulled those new jail bars out by the roots.

They gave Morley Jacobs a hand up, and he came out a free man, still looking for trouble. Hamp got over his sickness a little and remembered that his boys were a pretty wild bunch at best, and that tonight they had their dander up.

He came running around to the back of the courthouse, with fat old Bob Honeycutt lumbering after him. The Circle D gang were long gone. They had been paid to do a job of lynching, and when they saw the man who had paid them take his licking, their enthusiasm had sort of melted.

"Take Morley home," said Hamp. "Take him back to the Kentucky Twist and put him to work, Bill."

"But, Hamp—"

"You heard me! There's a judge in town who has the backing of the governor. I'm going to see to it that Morley

Jacobs stands trial."

"But blessed angels of hell—"

A little old white-haired man came out of the shadows. He seemed to have no fear. Maybe he figured he'd already lived long enough, or maybe he just never had known the feeling of fear.

"Which one is the prisoner?" he asked.

EVEN Big Bill, who took authority only when it was shoved down his throat, acceded to the authority in that mild voice. He pointed to Morley Jacobs.

"That one, sir, but he—"

The judge ignored Big Bill. He turned to Bob Honeycutt. "Sheriff, this is a disgrace. If you're unable to hold a prisoner you're supposed to apply to the court for help."

"But Judge, I—"

"The law has come to Blue Butte," the old judge cut in, still in that same mild voice, "and if you're unable to maintain it, I'll apply to the governor for troops. I do not intend ever to hold court again where I have to maintain order with my own pistol."

"But Judge, I—" Bob Honeycutt started to say.

Hamp clapped him on the back. "Judge, don't be too hard on old Bob," he said. "He's honest, at least, and that's the first thing we want in a law officer around here."

The judge's cold eyes swung around to Hamp. "Young man," he said, "I gave you a silver dollar earlier this evening. Let me have it back."

Wonderingly, Hamp handed over the dollar. The judge dropped it into his pocket.

"Bail money," he said. "Murder is not bailable by writ but only at the discretion of the court." He looked up at Morley Jacobs, then pointed off with his finger. "Yonder's the horizon. Here's court. I'll be back in a month to try you."

"Yes sir," Morley said respectfully. "Damned if I'm not going to be here, too, Judge! I—I'll trust any man who . . . I mean if you want anybody killed, Judge—"

The judge chuckled and stepped close to Hamp. He looked Hamp in the eye.

"You're like your father," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Hamp.

"But the country has changed."

"Yes, sir."

"You'll get your dollar back when the prisoner is produced in my court in Blue Butte one month from today."

"Yes, sir," Hamp said again. He turned and yelled at the Twist crew, "Hit leather, you Kentucky Twisters! Got a hard day's work ahead of you tomorrow!"

"Angels of hell, blessed and otherwise!" howled Big Bill Townsend. "Ride, boys! This is prob'ly the last jail we'll ever get to wreck."

It was.

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A Thrilling Jim Hatfield Novel

By JACKSON COLE

The

Devil's Dues

a novelet by RAY G. ELLIS

CHAPTER I

Not Welcome

THE horses's hooves thudded dully in the carpet of dust on Torrent's Main Street. Jack Marquard, astride a tired bay gelding, was trail weary and saddle sore from unaccustomed riding. Yet as his dark eyes flitted over the street, they missed nothing of importance.

He was thinking, Get the money and the girl—then get out of town.

Torrent was about as it had been when he had left two years before. There was one new restaurant, he noticed, but the rest of the town was only two years older. But it was a busy town, always had been, for it was the center of activity of Green Valley, rich ranching country.

No one paid Marquard any mind. He saw familiar faces but the eyes in them didn't notice him. The grip Morie Kell and Ham Rolla had on Torrent hadn't slowed business down any. That was good, Marquard figured. It would make his own take that much bigger. He reined in in front of a sign that said:

Marshal's Office
Morris Kell, Marshal

Marquard swung stiffly down and looped the reins over the rail. He stepped up on the wooden walk,

Jake Marquard came back from prison for the girl and the money promised him, and ran into deadly trouble on both counts

hitching up his gunbelt. As he did, he heard a woman's voice say:

"I beg your pardon."

When he turned he found he had walked directly in front of a young woman. He looked down at her and grinned, showing white teeth.

"I beg *your* pardon, ma'am," he apologized, touching the brim of his hat.

She was pretty, and she returned his grin, but her smile faded as her eyes lowered to his gun-belt. She looked back up into his face and her lips formed an "O", but no sound was forthcoming as she pushed on past him. His eyes followed her, liking the graceful sway of her body as she walked.

Then he turned back toward the law office, glad now that his trail had been long. He had had time to get rid of his prison pallor.

He shoved open the door and saw the marshal sitting at his desk with his back toward the door.

Getting careless, Marquard thought.

Through a door that led to the cells in the back came the sound of singing. It was a lonesome sound, a cattle song. Jack Marquard guessed it to be some cowhand down on his luck who was intoning the mournful notes.

"Hello Morie," Marquard greeted.

THE marshal swiveled around in his chair.

His face remained expressionless as he said in greeting, "Jack Marquard. Heard you was out."

Being the lawman in Torrent, of course Kell would have been informed when Marquard was being discharged from the state prison.

"You look overjoyed to see me, Morie," Marquard commented drily. "But don't worry. I won't stay long."

Marquard's words seemed to ease the tension in Kell. Belatedly he rose from his chair and extended a heavy hand. Marquard thought about it for a moment before he shook hands.

"You don't look much different, Morie," he told the marshal. "Maybe a little heavier—and a few more gray hairs."

Kell nodded and sat down again, the chair complaining loudly about the weight it had to bear. "It's been a rough haul since you've been gone, Jack," Morie complained. "Things are moving a lot slower than we planned."

Marquard put one foot on a chair and pulled out the "makings." Mechanically he rolled a smoke while he stared at the marshal. Finally he nodded and said, "Plenty rough, I'll bet. I had a picnic up there at the state pen."

"I didn't mean it that way, Jack," Kell hastened to say. "But we haven't taken out of Torrent near what we figured on."

Marquard told him, "I just came back after my share. When I get that I'll leave you and Rolla alone. After I leave there won't be but a two-way split. That ought to make you happy."

Kell shifted uncomfortably in his chair. From his vest he drew out a cigar and bit off the end. He spat in the general direction of the cuspidor beside his desk and lit the cigar. Marquard waited patiently, although he recognized the signs that Morie was about to give him some kind of run around.

The marshal blew smoke from the corner of his mouth, and said conversationally, "Ham told me the other day that he's still got an opening for you. There's always room for another gunhand." He added quickly when he saw Marquard begin to color in anger, "Ham Rolla pays good, Jack. Before you fly off the handle you better talk to him. You always was too hot-headed."

Marquard hitched at his gun belt and Kell recognized the danger signal. The marshal's hand moved slowly toward his own gun as Marquard spoke.

"You think I spent two years in the pen to take suspicion off you and Ham Rolla just so's I could come back to a hundred-and-fifty-a-month job?" Marquard cried. "Hell, I had that when I left here. I got it all figured out that you owe me five thousand dollars—and you're getting off cheap at that! In case you can't

figger it, it comes to only a little over two hundred a month. That's damn cheap pay for two years on the rock pile."

The swivel in Kell's chair squealed as the marshal leaned forward. There was a look of amusement on his heavy features as he said, "You're thinking too heavy, Jack. Like I told you, things ain't been so good. I doubt if Rolla could raise that kind of money—even if he wanted too."

Marquard flipped his cigarette butt in the direction of the cuspidor. It fell at Kell's feet and the marshal looked down at it, coloring.

He said quietly, "Maybe you'd better leave Torrent. I don't think we need you here."

Marquard massaged the knuckles of his right hand with his left. The lines around his mouth were tight as he said, "Maybe you'd like to try and make me leave, Morie."

The big man came up out of the chair, drawing his hand from under his coat. It held a .45 Colt. He smiled thinly at Marquard.

"You're getting careless, Jack," he said "I meant what I said. Get out of Torrent and stay out. Remember, I can have you back in prison in no time."

MARQUARD leaned forward on the balls of his feet, his fists half-clenched.

"You're forgetting how much I know about you and Rolla," he said. "I could make it rough on you and Rolla—and Ham wouldn't like that."

As he spoke the last word he sprang forward and to one side, slapping at the gun in Kell's hand. It flew from the marshal's grip and spun heavily to the floor. Even though surprised, Kell brought a heavy fist around, aimed at Marquard's head. Marquard partially warded off the blow but still it broke through, numbing the side of his head.

Kell followed up his advantage viciously, slamming rights and lefts to Marquard's head. Jack backed up under the onslaught, lashing out when he saw an opening. He opened a cut under Kell's left eye, then caught a blow himself and tasted blood.

Kell caught sight of the gun on the floor right under his feet then. He threw a left, then bent over, trying to scoop the weapon up. Marquard brought his knee up and felt Kell's nose give under the blow. Uttering a strangled cry, the marshal fell on top of the gun, unconscious.

Marquard stood over him for minutes, trying to get his wind. He realized now what poor shape he was in from prison life. It shouldn't have been that hard to whip Kell.

Suddenly he remembered the cowboy in the cell in the rear. He got the keys from Kell's pocket and went through the door to the row of cells. The cowboy, or whoever it was, had stopped singing when the commotion had broken out in front. Marquard saw him sitting on the edge of his bunk, staring out.

"I remember you," the prisoner said. "You're one of 'em, too." He said that bitterly.

Marquard rattled the keys in the lock, trying to recall who the man was. Then he remembered a small ranch on rich land, a ranch that even two years ago Rolla had coveted because of its strategic position in the valley.

"You're Isaac Dabney," Marquard said. Then sniffing the whisky fumes in the air, he said, "I never figured you to be locked up for being drunk."

Marquard swung the door open. Dabney just kept staring at him, not moving from the bunk. He was an older man than Marquard; maybe forty-five. The range clothes he wore were dirty and torn. At the mention of whisky, he dropped his eyes.

"It just didn't seem to matter any more after they took the ranch," he said in a low voice. "Then after my wife died—"

To Marquard came the memory of a warm spring evening, of a little ranch house nestled near a creek out in Green Valley. Over two years ago that had been, when he'd ridden up to that house and warned Dabney to leave Green Valley if he knew what was good for him. Dabney had laughed at him then and Marquard,

angered, had drawn his sixgun. But Dabney had made no move, had just stood there, smiling at Marquard, and Marquard had had to ride off. Even then he had felt a certain respect for the rancher's nerve. The man might be foolish but he certainly didn't lack spunk.

Now, as Marquard looked down at Dabney, he again felt anger—but not for the rancher. Rolla was responsible for his rage. Rolla had broken the spirit of this man as a man might break the spirit of a horse. Only with effort did Jack Marquard shake off the feeling, wondering what in hell he was getting soft about.

"Well, get up!" he said shortly. "The door's open. Why don't you leave?"

He turned and walked out the back door of the jail into an alley.

The new restaurant he had noticed before was a half block down the street, Marquard saw, as he emerged from the alley behind the jail. His face smarted under the bruises he had received from Kell's fists, and his stomach growled hungrily. The hard-packed dirt of the side street made walking difficult and it was a relief when he stepped onto the wooden sidewalk of Main Street.

He retrieved his horse from in front of the marshal's office and led the weary mount to a stable across the street. He tipped the stable boy generously out of the small supply of cash he had left, ordering him to take good care of the gelding.

WHEN he was out on the street again he noticed that Torrent had grown more than he had at first thought. The street was busy with traffic. Something was wrong, though, and he finally figured out what it was. Nobody was smiling. They moved about their business with deadly seriousness, nodding shortly to acquaintances. There was a tautness in the air, as if something was stretched tight through the town, touching everyone.

He moved down the sidewalk toward the new restaurant. A sign hung out over the doorway said simply, "Eat." Marquard went inside and sat down at the counter.

The waitress shoved a menu under his nose and he looked up. It was the girl he had almost run into in front of the marshal's office. She studied the bruises on his face and said:

"It looks like you and the marshal had a tussle. I'm surprised you're still walking around."

Bitterness, he thought was not in keeping with her appearance. Her face tapered gently toward the chin and her mouth was wide, yet not too wide. There was a snap to her blue eyes, and he guessed that under certain conditions those eyes migh turn glacial.

He told her, "The last time I saw the marshal, ma'am, he wasn't in any condition keep anybody from walking around. In fact you'll find his prisoner walking around the streets somewheres."

"You let Isaac Dabney out of jail?" she asked, her eyes widening.

Marquard nodded and grinned at her. He said, "The old feller wasn't doing any good in there. Besides it didn't seem enough just to beat up Kell, not after he pulled a gun on me. Now how about getting me some steak and eggs?"

She nodded and said, "I thought maybe you felt sorry for Dabney and—"

"You thought that was why I let him out?" Marquard interrupted. He threw back his head and laughed. Then seriously, he said, "I came back to Torrent for just two things. When I get them I'm leaving for good. I've had enough of this town and the people in it."

"You're just what I thought you were," the girl said, defiance flashing in her eyes.

Marquard noticed then the lettering on her uniform. It said, "Eileen." They sure were getting fancy in Torrent, he thought.

He asked, "Eileen what?"

She said with a toss of her head, "Eileen Waring—and I'll get your order."

While she was gone Marquard wondered what she had meant when she had said that he was just what she had thought he was. He wasn't any prize package when it came to looks, but he'd seen a lot worse. Then he asked himself what difference it made, anyway. As soon as he got the

money, he and Lita would be leaving for bigger things than Torrent had to offer.

Eileen brought the meal and he finished it off quickly. She made no more conversation, although Marquard tried several times to talk to her. He paid the bill and left the restaurant.

That girl sure didn't cotton to him. He wondered what she had against him. After all, he had just ridden into town.

CHAPTER II

She Didn't Wait

MARQUARD wandered down the sidewalk, at loose ends. He didn't want to see Hamilton Rolla, not just yet. He'd ride out to Rolla's ranch as soon as he found how things lay in Torrent.

Then ahead of him, walking in the same direction, Marquard saw a tall slender girl and instantly quickened his pace, noticing how the blue dress she wore swirled about her ankles. Her hair was long and black as a raven's wing.

"Lita!" he called.

She paused as he drew up beside her. He was startled to see in her face the same unsmiling look he had recognized in the faces of others here in Torrent. But then he recalled that Lita had always been withdrawn, that way, like a sleek cat, with no man her master. That's what had always fascinated him about her.

For the two years he had been in prison he had been planning how he and Lita would go away from Torrent when he got the money. When he'd left she'd promised to wait for him. He'd planned how they would go to Kansas City or even St. Louis with plenty of money to spend.

Lita's gray eyes looked at him now and she tried a weak smile. "Jack! You—I didn't know. Morie didn't tell me you were coming."

Morie wouldn't, Marquard thought. He always did have a fancy for you, Lita. He studied her, saw something in her eyes that had never been there before, and recognized it for what it was. It was fear. He took her arm and led her into an empty doorway.

"You didn't break out?" she asked anxiously.

He shook his head smiling. "I wanted to plenty of times, Lita," he told her. "But I stuck it out so I'd be free when I came back after you. They paroled me for good behavior." He chuckled and added, "Can you imagine me getting anything for good behavior?"

She smiled wanly and said nothing. Marquard looked into her face, again seeing the pinched, worried look that was there. All that would change, once they were away from Torrent, he told himself.

"I've been planning for us all the while I've been gone, Lita," Marquard said. "I'm going to get five thousand out of Rolla and Kell. Then you and I will head out for bigger things."

When she looked up at him, once more he read fear clearly in her eyes. But there was longing there, too, and he forgot the fear. She said, "I've finished buying supplies, Jack. I brought the buckboard into town for them. Let's ride back home and talk."

He frowned, puzzled, and asked, "You don't live in town any more?"

She shook her head and started off down the street before he could say more. The buckboard was a half-block down the street. He helped her up onto the seat and climbed up beside her.

He said, "I've got a horse at the stable. I'll get it and tie it behind."

She said nothing and Jack drove to the stable. He tied the bay behind the wagon and slapped the team into motion with the reins, heading out of town.

They were silent until Torrent was far behind. Then Jack said, "It's been a long time, Lita. Too long."

He slipped an arm about her. She slid over close to him.

"I've never stopped thinking about you," he told her.

"Jack, I—"

She seemed to draw within herself and

away from Marquard. Instinctively he held her tighter to keep her from slipping away from him completely. Then she turned toward him as if she had made up her mind to speak even though what she said might hurt.

"Why did you have to come back?" she asked him. "Can't you see there's nothing here for you?"

"Nothing but you and five thousand dollars," he told her. "I'll leave when I get those two things."

"You'll never get the money, Jack. They'll kill you first. The ranchers have put up more fight than anybody thought they would. Rolla's taken over a few ranches in the valley, but it's cost him a lot of money."

THE road dipped down into the rich valley and now they were nearing a grove of cottonwoods along a creek. Marquard said, "Do you think I care how tough it's been for them? Why do you think I let Morie send me to prison so it would look like he was doing his job? It wasn't so I could come back to nothing more than I left. I'll tell you that."

The road made a Y and Lita indicated the right hand road. Down the other fork lay Rolla's spread, Marquard remembered, and he himself would be taking that road soon.

The land rose gently from the stream they had just crossed. Silently they rode side by side, Marquard still with his arm about Lita as she started ahead down the road. In a few minutes they topped a rise and ahead of them was a gate. In the near distance a little white ranch house lay nestled near a spring.

Marquard leaned forward, reading the name on a mail-box beside the gate.

"'Mr. and Mrs. Morris Kell'," he read aloud. He stared again at the house ahead and said, "That's Dabney's old place."

Lita nodded, and watched as further knowledge came to Marquard. His mouth tightened into a thin line and whitened at the corners. He said in a terrible voice, "You married Kell! You didn't wait."

Frightened at his sudden burst of temper she said, "I couldn't help it, Jack! It was such a long time. I couldn't stand it any longer, singing in that saloon and being pawed every night by drunken men. Morie promised to take me out if I married him. Can't you see how it was?"

"I should have killed him when I had the chance," Marquard muttered, then his voice rose as he roared, "But this hasn't changed anything, do you hear! You're still coming with me when I leave."

She looked away and stammered, "I—I don't know, Jack. It hasn't been easy, being married to Morie. I shouldn't have married him, but I couldn't help it. Try to understand that."

Facing each other on the seat of the buckboard he pulled her to him and kissed her with the sudden passion of possessiveness. "Nothing can stop us, Lita! It'll be just you and me from now on."

She pulled away from him and said, "You'd better leave me here now, and ride out. Morie will be coming home before long. He said he'd be home early tonight."

Marquard jumped down from the buckboard and opened the gate. When Lita had driven through, he untied his horse and led it up beside the vehicle.

Grinning, he said to Lita, "I don't imagine Morie will be feeling so good tonight. He had a little nose trouble today."

"You've seen Morie!" she said. "You didn't—"

"He ain't hurt bad," Marquard told her. "What difference does it make, anyway? You'll be leaving him now as soon's I give the word."

She leaned toward him, pleading in her eyes as she said, "Promise me you won't hurt him, Jack. You've got to promise that."

"Seems to me you're worrying a lot about a man you don't care for," Marquard said, his voice full of suspicion. "Maybe things are different than you say they are."

"It's not that, Jack," Lita said. "I—I just don't want him killed, that's all. I don't want anybody killed!"

"All right, I won't start anything with

Morie," Marquard told her. He led the bay through the gate and pulled it closed. When he was astride his horse he called to her, "We'll be leaving soon's I get the money."

She watched him solemnly until he was out of sight over the hill, then drove slowly toward the house ahead.

Marquard rode back to the Y in the road and took the other fork. It was rolling country, heavy with grass. Fat cattle grazed on each side of the road. No wonder Rolla wanted the whole valley. With it he could be easily the richest man in the state. Naturally that would lead to other things, like being governor, which had always been his ambition.

IT WAS a peaceful countryside but underneath, like an underground river, ran a current of lust and greed, sucking happiness from the inhabitants of Green Valley. Marquard had felt it in town, and now knew that it reached out into the valley, touching even him in that moment.

The Rafter H R ranch house was some distance off the road. Marquard saw it from a distance with the lowering sun reflecting gold off of it. Then it was hidden by a hill and when he saw it again he was close. He rode into the tree-shaded yard and dismounted, leaving his horse at the fence.

He banged on the door with his fist and waited. Shortly Rolla's Mexican servant answered the door. He remembered Marquard and greeted him by name.

"I want to see Rolla," Marquard demanded.

He was led down a long hall toward Rolla's office. Everything was familiar to Marquard, for nothing had been changed since he had been in the house just before he'd gone off to prison. The Mexican knocked at a door at the end of the hall and Marquard heard Rolla's booming voice telling them to enter.

There had been nothing extraordinary about the furnishings of the rest of the house, but Rolla had made up for that in his office. The entire room was paneled in imported walnut. Covering the floor was a thick carpet, springy underfoot. Marquard felt the heels of his boots sink into it as he entered the room.

Rolla was behind his desk, plainly a tall man, even though sitting down. When he saw Marquard he rose from the chair and came around the desk, towering over Marquard's six foot by four or five inches. He stuck out a huge hand.

"Welcome back, Jack. We've been expecting you."

As the voice rolled through the room, Marquard was conscious of the vibration against his ears. The power of the man touched him and he tried to ignore it as he took the outstretched hand.

He said shortly, "Waiting with open arms, no doubt."

Hamilton Rolla went back to his desk and drew a cigar from a humidor. As an afterthought he offered the humidor to Marquard. Jack took a cigar, sniffing at the expensive tobacco before lighting it.

"I heard you weren't doing so good, Ham," he said. "But things can't be too bad if you're smoking tobacco like this."

Rolla frowned and motioned to a chair beside the desk. "Sit down, Jack," he said.

"I'll stand. What I got to say won't take long."

Rolla rolled his cigar around in his lips, moistening it before he lit it. When that was done he looked up at Marquard. He said, "You've changed, Jack."

Marquard was tense. Even before he'd gone to prison Rolla's power had always swayed him. Now he fought against it.

"You've grown up, Jack," Rolla went on. "I figured on putting you back on the pay-roll, but I suppose that's out now."

Marquard nodded. He said sharply, "I want five thousand dollars, Rolla, and I want it now. That's little enough pay for what I've been through."

The big man smiled and said, "I hardly keep that much around the house Jack. You ought to know that."

Marquard went to the door and paused, saying, "Have it in town tomorrow. I'll be at the hotel." Then taking a step toward the man he went on, "Don't try to hedge out on me, Rolla. I know enough about the

organization to put *you* on the rock pile, and I've already paid my debt. Remember that!"

"I'm covered, Jack," Rolla said and he wasn't smiling now. His eyes were hard beads as he looked up at Marquard. "You don't think I'd leave myself wide open so a gunslick like you could stop me, do you? I'm going to be governor, Marquard."

Marquard backed again to the door. He said, "You're taking protection money from the merchants of Torrent. You're using it to pay off the local judges and anybody else who might get in your way. Just a word in the right place would start things rolling Rolla. Don't forget that." Marquard opened the door. "You can be president of the United States if you want to, Rolla—after you pay me the five thousand."

WILLIAM ROLLA had opened his mouth to speak when Marquard slammed the door in his face. He strode down the long hall, wishing there had been some way to get the money right then. A lot could happen in one day.

He was still smoldering when he climbed aboard his mount and spurred the horse out of the yard in a hard run.

By the time he reached the Y in the road it was dusk. His thoughts were churning, and he wasn't paying too much attention to the road.

It was a bold attempt on his life and, he thought afterward, just like Rolla to do it that way. A man stepped out into the road, a rifle to his shoulder. So deep in thought was Marquard that for a moment his brain didn't register. But with the flash of the rifle, he was sliding to one side, putting himself between his horse and the assassin. The bullet whined overhead, and Marquard stabbed at his own gun, drawing it out in one smooth motion.

The rifleman levered another shot into the gun and threw it to his shoulder. In that moment Marquard squeezed off a shot, then another. His attacker sank to his knees, trying to hold the rifle up. For a moment he hung there between life and death, then gave up and fell forward onto his face.

Marquard rode up beside the body and stared down. The fellow would have a horse around somewhere, he knew. There was a thicket off to his left. He rode around it and found the horse on the side away from the road. Only there were two horses!

Marquard fell from the saddle like a limp sack as a bullet went over his head to rip through foliage behind him. The shot had come from some rocks about fifty feet away. He lay still, noticing the Rafter H R on the horses' rumps. It was no surprise that his attackers were Rolla's men. The road Marquard had been traveling himself was the long way to town, winding around the hills. These two had obviously cut over the hills to head him off. Marquard began to inch his way in a long arc around the rocks, protected from sight by the heavy brush. It was almost completely dark by the time he had worked his way around so that he was behind the man in the rocks. He watched sardonically as the man stared about in the darkness. Abruptly Jack Marquard brought his pistol to bear and called, "Drop it!"

CHAPTER III

Desperate Tactics

THE would-be killer in the rocks fired frantically in the direction of Jack Marquard's voice. Marquard squeezed off a shot, and the man grabbed for his shoulder while his gun went clattering among the rocks. He stood up, holding his good arm into the air.

Marquard came out from his corner and walked toward the fellow who stood with downcast eyes. He needed a shave. His eyes glittered in the dim light and Marquard saw in the man a reflection of what he himself had been two years before.

"Rolla sent you," Marquard said flatly.

The gunman said nothing.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll get out of the valley," Marquard told him. When still the man said nothing, Marquard went on, "That's not a threat—that's advice."

The man moved forward when Marquard motioned with his gun for him to mount. He told him, "Take your pard back with you. I want Rolla to see what happens to his killers when they go after the wrong man."

The gunman's eyes glittered through slits at Marquard as they moved toward the road and Marquard thought, If looks could kill—

Marquard put the dead gunman across the saddle of the horse he had ridden, and the two men moved down the road, one wounded, one dead. He watched until they were out of sight, then rode on toward Torrent.

It was well past suppertime when Marquard entered town. It was a warm evening and Main Street was crowded with idlers. Marquard sent the bay down the street in a jog toward the stable.

He rode inside and dismounted. The boy he had tipped so generously earlier came forward and took the reins. His eyes were wide as he looked up at Marquard.

"Did you honest beat up the marshal, Mr. Marquard?" the boy said, fear and respect mingling in his voice.

"Who said that?" Marquard asked gruffly.

"It's all over town," the boy told him. "Mr. Kell walked right through town with blood all over him to the doctor."

Marquard grinned, picturing Kell's rage at having to parade his injury in front of the whole town. "I reckon I was the one that did it, son," Marquard said. He ruffled the boys hair, walked out of the stable, and headed down the street to the restaurant where he had eaten earlier. The girl, Eileen, had been on his mind as he had ridden toward town after the shooting. Why she should have come to mind right then, he didn't know. But, nevertheless, she had. He shoved through the door expectantly.

There was only one other person at the counter, and that was Isaac Dabney. Marquard nodded at the rancher and noticed he was nursing a cup of coffee. Marquard took a stool near the front of the café.

Dabney said, "I wouldn't set near that window if I was you, Marquard. If Kell should take a notion to ride into town tonight, you'd be the first thing he'd see. You're not exactly a favorite of his after what you did to him this afternoon."

Marquard, realizing the wisdom of the advice, walked down the room and took a stool on the other side of Dabney. He said, "Why all the sudden interest in my health? In jail you acted like I was the next thing lower'n a snake."

Dabney shrugged thin shoulders and said, "One favor deserves another."

"I don't know as that was much of a favor, my letting you out, I mean."

"I'm not talking about that," Dabney said. "You showed me that Morie Kell can be beat, and that done something to me. Even give me hope to get my ranch back."

MARQUARD felt a growing uneasiness. Dabney had just about made a hero of him and he, Marquard, hadn't acted for that reason. Five thousand dollars had been his motive.

"You had a good ranch," Marquard said. "Rich. It must have been quite a chore for Rolla and Kell to take it from you."

Dabney snorted in disgust. "Easy as pie. So easy it makes a man sick to think about it, specially when he knows it's going to happen to everybody else in Green Valley unless them two are stopped."

"But what about the county sheriff?" Marquard asked, a little amazed at his own interest in these people. "Rolla don't control him, does he?"

Dabney shook his head. "No, he don't control the sheriff, and he don't have to. Every rancher has to borrow now and then, and it don't make no difference how big nor how small he is. Most ranchers borrow every year, paying back after the fall roundup."

Marquard nodded, knowing this, of course.

"So when Ham Rolla couldn't scare me off," Dabney went on bitterly, "he bought controlling interest in the Torrent Bank. It took near all his money, but it looks like it was worth it. When I had to borrow last year the bank closed the door in my face. Said I wasn't a good risk—and me having one of the best ranches in the valley! I couldn't borrow nowhere else, although I tried. You couldn't blame them out-of-town bankers. They didn't know me. And now it looks like the whole valley'll go the same way I did.

Silence settled between the two men when Dabney finished. Rolla was smart, much smarter than Marquard had thought, It had seemed so simple there in prison to come back, demand payment for the two years behind bars and leave town. He'd figured they'd pay because they would be afraid he'd expose them if they didn't. But that wasn't what Rolla was afraid of now. He'd covered up his dirty work well. He was afraid of a blot on his name, a blot that would hurt his chances of becoming governor.

The Dabney spread had been an expensive gift to Morie Kell—if it had been a gift—but well worth the cost. As long as Rolla controlled the law in Torrent he had nothing to fear.

"What'd your place bring?" Marquard finally asked.

"Forty-five hundred dollars," Dabney said. "About a third of what it's worth. Rolla paid me the money right out of his pocket."

"Then he's still holding the deed?"

"Far's I know."

The kitchen door opened and Eileen came in, and up to them behind the counter.

"I thought I heard voices," she said. "I—" She stopped short when she saw Marquard.

Dabney said, "This is Mr. Marquard, Eileen. My niece, Eileen Waring."

"We've met already, Uncle Isaac," Eileen said coolly.

"He's the one that let me out of jail, Eileen," Dabney said, obviously puzzled at the tone of his niece's voice. "He broke Morie Kell's nose."

"He did that just for you, of course," Eileen said.

Marquard watched the girl's face, amused. The eyes were definitely glacial now. He liked the way the color had heightened in her cheeks in her anger.

He drawled, "I'd like something to eat when you get through talking about me."

"You're too late," she told him shortly. "I was just ready to close up."

Dabney cut in before Marquard could speak. "That's no way to treat a hungry man, Eileen. Besides, it ain't good for business. I know you bought this place with your own money and I ain't trying to tell you how to run it, but out here folks don't refuse food to a hungry man."

Marquard nodded. "Sorry to cause you the trouble."

JACK MARQUARD was still eating hungrily when Dabney left, to go to his hotel room. Marquard felt better now, with his stomach full, and he relished his cigarette and coffee. Eileen was filling his cup for the second time.

"Maybe you'd rather I didn't stay any longer," he said. "I don't have to have that coffee, and I know you'd like to close up."

Eileen smiled at him and he realized that it was the first time he had seen her do that. He liked it.

She said, "Take your time, Mr. Marquard. I'm sorry I acted so foolish."

"You had a right, I reckon," he said. Then smiling back at her, he said, "And my name is Jack."

"All right, Jack," Eileen said quietly.

He finished the coffee and stubbed out his cigarette. "I'll help you close up," he said.

She laughed lightly and said, "There's not much to it. Just blow out the lamps and lock the door."

When they were out on the sidewalk, Marquard suddenly became acutely aware of Eileen's nearness. The town had quieted down considerably, with only faint sounds issuing from the saloon up the street even.

"I must be getting home," Eileen said.

Marquard said, "You shouldn't live in the hotel, Eileen. It ain't safe for—"

"I don't live in the hotel," she interrupted. "I came out here to live with Uncle Isaac when my folks died, but the ranch was too far from town and there was nothing for me to do out there. I've lived at Mrs. Murphy's since I started the restaurant with the money my parents left me."

They started to walk slowly away from the center of town. Marquard liked the feel of Eileen beside him, clean as the night air around them. He looked down at her as she talked. Without thinking he started to put his arm about her, but caught himself and let it drop back to his side.

She was saying, "You said you wanted two things before you left Torrent, Jack. What were they?"

"They weren't important."

"Then you'd leave without them?"

"No."

"Then they must be important to you."

"All right," he said abruptly. "If you must know, I want five thousand dollars from Rolla and Kell before I leave." His words were clipped. "I reckon you know I was in prison for two years?" She nodded. He said, "The money is payment for that."

"Uncle Isaac told me about how you threatened him once," Eileen said. "Now he thinks maybe you've learned your lesson in prison."

"Dabney's a fool," Marquard told her. "You've got to be strong to get what you want."

"And whats the other thing you want?" Eileen asked. She looked at him sideways. "Is it the marshal's wife, Lita? I saw you ride out of town with her today."

Marquard colored, and was glad they were no longer in the lighted business district. Eileen had guessed the truth, and it made him uncomfortable.

Then she said, "I'm sorry. That wasn't fair."

They walked in silence until the dark bulk of Mrs. Murphy's loomed up ahead of them. The few scattered houses were dark. There was no moon, which made the stars seem brighter. From the valley came the scent of sage and of grass.

"It's beautiful here in the valley," Eileen breathed. "I never want to leave."

It *was* beautiful, Marquard thought. It was something he had never realized before, something he had always taken for granted. It had taken a stranger to point it out to him.

SUDDENLY it was necessary to apologize to her and he said, "I'm sorry about your uncle's ranch."

She looked up at him as they stopped in front of the dark rooming house. She said, "It wasn't your fault, Jack. You weren't even here."

No, the law would never say it was his fault, he knew. Still, he had been a part of it, had helped Rolla climb the ladder. Those were the things that had lost Dabney his ranch and would probably cause the rest of the valley people to lose theirs. He knew his thoughts would sound foolish if he tried to explain them to Eileen, so he said nothing.

The stood with silence and a short space of night between them, then Eileen said, "I—I'd better go in, Jack."

Their hands met in the dark and closed, then suddenly she was in his arms. He bent his head and kissed her full lips and only silence was between them. She broke away then and whispered, "Good night, Jack."

He watched until she was lost to his sight in the dark doorway of the house. Then he walked back toward town, conscious of the pounding of his heart.

You're a fool, he told himself. You're leaving town tomorrow with Lita and you get yourself mixed up with this girl. He shrugged and tried to erase the thought of her from his mind. She'd forget, he told himself. But something inside kept asking him if he would forget as easily.

Marquard slept later than he had intended. Not that it made much difference. All he had to do was wait until Rolla delivered the money. And that Rolla would do just that, Marquard felt certain. Rolla was worried about what Marquard

might do.

He thought of the money while he dressed, wondering how big a stack of bills it would make. First, he and Lita would go to Kansas City. He'd dress her up in clothes she had never dreamed of. When they tired of that, theyd travel until—

But somehow the dream didn't seem as bright as it had all those days he dreamed it in prison. In fact, a lot of things were different than he had remembered them. In prison he had recalled his run-in with Dabney and had thought of the rancher as a crusty old man, someone to be kicked out of the way. Now he saw the man as a human being with likes and wants the same as himself. Everybody seemed that way now, and it made living much more difficult.

He went downstairs, buckling his gunbelt about his waist. This morning he didn't want to see Eileen, so he went into the hotel dining room for his breakfast. That probably saved his life.

He polished off steak and eggs, then went into the lobby to wait. The clerk behind the desk motioned to him as he left the dining room and Marquard walked over.

"A gray-haired gent left this for you, Mr. Marquard," the clerk said, handing him an envelope.

Marquard took it and went to a Morris chair that commanded a view of the street. When he was seated he ripped it open curiously, wondering who would leave him a note.

The note, brief and to the point, read:

> Marquard, I've gone to get the sheriff. You'll need him before the day is over. Don't leave the hotel.
>
> Isaac Dabney

Marquard read it twice before he folded it up and shoved it back into the envelope. He didn't know quite what to think of the note. Eileen had undoubtedly told her uncle of Marquard's plan for getting five thousand dollars and that must have worried the old man. He wished Dabney had kept out of his business, then realized that old rancher was just trying to pay back a favor.

Marquard went to the desk again, asking, "What time was this note left for me?"

The clerk scratched his head, thinking. Then he remembered. "It was several hours ago, before you came down for breakfast, Mr. Marquard."

MARQUARD took a cigar from the box on the desk and put down his nickel, thanking the clerk for the information. Dabney must have heard something, he thought, lighting the cigar. The man wouldn't run off on a wild horse chase. Or would he? Perhaps Eileen would know. He headed for the front door of the hotel.

He had his hand on the door knob before he stopped. Something stirred uneasily within him and he moved away from the door, sliding behind a potted fern where he could see the street without being seen himself. For minutes he stood motionless, studying the street and the stores across the way. He was almost ready to chide himself for being so jumpy when he saw the glint of the rifle-barrel in an upstairs window over the saloon across the street.

He smiled thinly. Rolla was really worried if he would take a chance on a killing in town. And if he was that worried he'd pay off the five thousand to get Marquard off his back.

He watched the second-story window without moving. Behind the gun he saw the shadowy outline of a man's head. With something as important as this in the breeze, he guesed that Rolla himself would be in town to make sure nothing went wrong. The powerful rancher had all the odds on his side since he controlled Torrent's marshal, but still he would take no chances.

Two years ago Marquard would have killed the man behind the gun without giving him a chance. But that was two years ago. Now he knew he would have to go out on the street to make sure the man was after him before he shot at him.

Dabney wouldn't be back with the sheriff, though, until noon or after, and

Marquard didn't feel he could wait that long. Lita Kell decided the question for him.

He was surprised to see her step out of the marshal's office and cross the street toward the hotel. He went back to the Morris chair, watching her stepping carefully over the rutted street. Just a little while more, he thought, and they'd be leaving Torrent behind them.

CHAPTER IV

Redemption

LITA came into the hotel, her eyes searching the lobby until they came to rest on Marquard.

"Jack," she said, coming to him.

He rose to meet her, resisting an impulse to draw her to him. Her face was pale and her hands moved nervously.

She said, "Morrie wants to see you in his office."

Marquard's mind raced. Why had Kell sent his wife instead of someone he didn't care for? Maybe he suspected the truth of what was between them. Maybe—

He shoved the thought from him. Even Kell wouldn't engineer the killing of his own wife.

Looking down at Lita, he told her, "You go back, Lita. Tell him I'll be there in a few minutes."

"But he's in a hurry, Jack," she said. "I think maybe it has to do with the money."

"Lita, honey, do as I say," he ordered her gently.

She would be in no danger crossing the street by herself. Even an idiot wouldn't gun down a lone woman on Main Street.

He watched until she was out on the street again before he went into action. There would be a back door to the hotel through the kitchen and that was where he headed.

The alley outside was empty, a high board fence shielding it from the rest of the town. For two blocks he ran down that alley then cut to his left, slowing to a fast walk until he reached another alley that ran beside the jail. If Kell had the money this was as good a way to get it as any. If he didn't Marquard would still be a live hombre, at least for awhile.

The back door of the jail was ajar and Marquard shoved carefully inside. The cells were empty. He made his way silently to the door leading to the office. It was open just a crack—enough for him to hear Lita saying: "I told you he wouldn't come with me. He made me come back alone. He said he'd be along in a few minutes."

Marquard was about to shove through the door when Lita spoke again, her voice lower.

"You're rotten, Morie Kell! You couldn't resist Rolla's suggestion to gun him down on Main Street!" Her voice lowered even more so that Marquard had to strain to hear as she said venomously, "I should have gone away with him like we planned instead of staying here with you!"

Marquard stared at the door, sickness runing through him. Lita had known about the plan to kill him! She had been part of it! It was like a knife cutting deep. Not at his heart, but at his brain, slicing away two years of planning and dreaming.

His temper slipped away from him then and he savagely kicked the office door open. Morie and Lita stared wide-eyed at the man they thought was in the lobby of the hotel. Lita's hands went to her face as Marquard stabbed at his pistol.

Morie Kell howled frantically, "I'm not armed, Marquard!"

Marquard withheld his fire with great effort. He ground out, "What about the rifleman across the street from the hotel? I reckon he was going to warn me before he put a bullet in me?"

Kell's face was drained of color. "That wasn't meant for you, Jack," he lied. "That—"

He never got to finish it. Marquard

laid the gun-barrel viciously against the side of his head. The heavy man slumped to the floor, a limp heap.

Lita came at Marquard, crying that he had killed Kell. Marquard slapped her hard with his left hand. The sound of her sobbing brought him to his senses. He holstered the gun, feeling disgust for his actions. He squatted beside Kell and felt for the marshal's pulse. It was only a little weak.

"He ain't dead," Marquard said.

Lita continued to sob.

"Where's Rolla staked out?" Marquard asked her.

SHE said nothing, and he realized he had been foolish to buffalo Morie Kell. The marshal would have known Rolla's whereabouts. He went to the door of the office and peered through the glass onto the street. Outside it was just like any other day in town. People moved about their business, unaware of the gun powder keg they were sitting upon.

Marquard had put his hand to the door knob when Lita cried out, "Don't go out, Jack!"

He turned to her stricken gaze. She came close to him. "Morie made me do it, Jack. He said he'd kill me if I didn't."

Lita's pleading voice was sickening to Marquard and he backed away from her. He looked down at Kell, still unconscious on the floor. He was glad he hadn't killed the marshal. It would serve Morie and Lita both right to have to live with each other. He pulled the door open a little.

Lita's voice was still begging when she said, "Rolla's in the bank, Jack. You can get the money from him there."

Marquard thought, I'll get it, but you won't see it.

The bank was on the opposite side of the street and past the hotel. It was open, for it was nearly eleven. Rolla would be in his private office waiting for news of Marquard's death.

Marquard's eyes searched the second-story windows of the hotel. As he had suspected, the thin barrel of a rifle hung from a window in the center. How many others were in town waiting for him, Marquard could only guess. He figured he'd find out when he stepped out onto the street. He pulled the door wide open and stepped out, hearing Lita gasp.

His sixgun was in his hand as he saw the barrel of the rifle swung around to his direction, and he sent two quick shots at the window. Glass disappeared from the partially opened window and the rifle clattered noisily onto the awning over the front door of the hotel.

The movement on the street doubled in pace at the sound of the shots. Eyes searched for the source and when they found Marquard with the smoking gun in his hand, men disappeared into the nearest doorways.

An awning sheltered Marquard's side of the street for the entire block. That meant that the rifleman on his side of the street would be out of action until Marquard crossed over to the bank.

He began to move along the walk, not too fast, his eyes continually roving over the street. He was past the saloon doors when one of Rolla's gunslicks stepped out. Marquard didn't see the man until someone shouted a warning. He turned then, snapping a shot at the gunman whose own gun was belching flame. The bullet tore a furrow up Marquard's right forearm, and only with the greatest effort did he keep from dropping the gun.

The gunman tilted back on his heels and fell over a chair left on the sidewalk for loungers. He was dead from Marquard's shot before he hit the walk, a circle of blood spreading across the front of his shirt.

Marquard shifted the gun to his left hand. He wasn't much of a shot with his off hand, but he had no choice. He had only two left in the gun, and there was no chance of reloading. But if things worked out he wouldn't need to reload.

He caught a glimpse of Eileen's pale face in the window of her restaurant as he passed by. For a crazy second he reflected how much the girl had come to mean to him—and he hadn't realized it before that moment. Then she was out of

his mind.

It was a short run across the street to the bank but now the gunman over the saloon would be waiting for him. Marquard ran.

One slug kicked up dirt at his feet, the next one knifed across the back of his thigh. With his right arm hanging bloody and useless at his side and blood streaming down his leg, Marquard was a terrifying sight as he staggered into the bank. Looking neither right nor left at the customers who stared at him, he made his way to the back—to Rolla's office.

HE PUT the gun in his belt, shoved open the door and grabbed the gun again. Rolla was alone. He looked up, startled, when Marquard entered. He started to come up out of the chair.

"Stay to hell where you are, Rolla!" Marquard ordered with all the savagery he could muster.

The rancher and banker stared at the gun and sat back down. "You need a doctor, Marquard," he said foolishly.

"You'll need an undertaker if you don't do exactly like I tell you," Marquard told him, trying to keep the pain he felt out of his voice. "I want five thousand dollars, Rolla. For two years spent in prison."

Hamilton Rolla started to protest, but shut his mouth when Marquard waved the gun at him. The banker moved slowly over to the safe and began to twirl the dial.

The room tilted then righted itself again as Marquard waited. It seemed like Rolla was taking an hour to open the safe. Then Marquard understood that the banker was stalling, waiting for Marquard to pass out.

"Open it up, Rolla!" he croaked out.

Wearily he lifted the gun and slammed a shot at Rolla's head. The door swung open and Rolla began to toss bundles of money onto his desk. Marquard stuffed them into his belt as fast as Rolla brought them out of the safe, not knowing how much he was getting, nor caring.

From outside the sound of shooting drifted into the room. Marquard said, "To hell with the money! I want the deed to Dabney's place. Sign it over to me."

"It's not here," Rolla said. "It's out at the ranch."

"This is where you do your business," Marquard told him, then added crazily, "If it's not here, I'll kill you."

Rolla dived for the safe again and brought out the deed. Marquard watched while the man signed it over. When that was done he forced his right hand to pick it up. He backed to the door and went out into the bank.

Everything was hazy, his arm pained him as he gripped the deed. With every step a hot poker slashed at his leg. He set his eyes on the front door.

The shooting outside had stopped, but Marquard didn't notice this. In fact, he noticed nothing. The door faded from his sight and he never knew when he hit the floor in a dead faint. . . .

Jack Marquard was in the lobby of the hotel when he came to his senses. First he heard the buzz of voices, then he opened his eyes to see Doc Flowers looking down at him. He was lying on a couch. Something moved under his head and he looked at Eileen who was cradling his head in one arm. She colored when their eyes met, but her arm stayed where it was under his head.

He thought of the money suddenly and reached for his belt. A white-bandanged arm moved and he hardly knew it was his. His belt was empty and the deed was gone from his hand.

"The money's safe," Eileen murmured. "I—we got to you before Rolla did."

Marquard searched his memory for a moment, then said, "I heard shooting before I pased out. What happened?"

Dabney came out of the crowd and knelt beside him. "I got back with the sheriff as soon as I could, but you were already in the bank. We had a little shoot-out with a hombre over the saloon. He lost. Eileen came running out of the restaurant and led us into the bank. We got Rolla and Kell. It don't look like we

can do much but run Kell and his woman out of town, but there's talk of everybody withdrawing their money from the bank and forcing Rolla out of business. You sure caused a big rumble around here, Marquard."

Marquard looked at the aging rancher. He owed his life to this man, for if Dabney hadn't left that note he would have walked right into Rolla's gunfire. He said, "Where's that piece of paper I had?"

EILEEN moved her arm from under his head and said, "It's right here on the floor with the money, Jack."

He saw as she handed it to him that somebody had wiped it off so that only a trace of bloodstain still showed on it.

He said, "It ain't hardly enough, Dabney, but I figure I owe it to you for saving my life." As he handed the deed to the old man he thought, I must be crazy. Now I'm going to give away the money, too. He told Dabney, "That money on the floor is yours, too. I figure that's just about what you lost from Kell taking over your spread."

Dabney objected, "That money belongs to Torrent folks. The bank'll need all the money it can get where the run starts."

Marquard shrugged. He thought, I've got no more self-respect than I had when I started. Then it occurred to him that he had his self-respect and that was worth more than any amount of money.

"You know," he said to Eileen, "Kansas City and St. Louis don't look so good from here. With Kell out of business and Rolla back where he started from, Torrent looks like it would be a right nice town to settle down in."

Eileen nodded, misty-eyed. She said, "I need someone to run the restaurant. I haven't made a cent since I opened it."

"If you marry me, Eileen, later on we'll get our own spread out in the valley," Marquard told her.

She said, "I don't care what we do, Jack, just so long as I'm with you."

She kissed him and he figured that he'd go through all that fight again just for a kiss like that if he had to. Of course, he didn't have to now.

THE SPARK OF AN IDEA

SUPPOSE it happened to you. Suppose you had your back to the river and some mighty unfriendly Indians were closing in on you. You had your musket, sure, but what good was it against the advance of so many adversaries. You might get a few, but they'd surely overwhelm you before it was over.

You look desperately about you. There's your drum of turpentine, and a little bundle of food. That's all you have. The river is too wide, too mean to try to swim. And you know that the Indians, although still out of sight, are hemming you in, tighter and tighter. What would you do? Well, one Julian Dubuque pondered over this problem, too. And it wasn't a fine theoretical point with him either. It was a painfully acute matter of life and death.

An enterprising French Canadian miner-explorer, he'd come down into what is now midwest U. S. A. looking for lead. And he'd had quite a bit of mining luck, too. But the Indians were riled up at him and, as he had reason to know, were going about the business of surrounding him for the purpose of separating him from his scalp.

Dubuque knew he had to do something and do it quickly if he were going to save himself, so he did this—he poured the turpentine into the river. Simple, eh? He only did only one more thing—he set a fire to the oily surface.

The Indians did the rest. Awed and alarmed at the spectacle of "burning water," as the ignited turpentine floated down the river, they turned and fled from the vicinity.

Julian Dubuque not only saved his life but made the spot immortal for himself. You've probably heard of Dubuque, Ia.

—*TEX MUMFORD*

The Indian held out the medical kit

Medicine Man

By WARREN KUHN

BY DAWN both both mother and child were sleeping, their bodies close together on the sweat-drenched bed, and Wade Ballard stepped outside to the well, peeled off the blue army shirt and sloshed water onto his head. It was awkward, steadying himself on his one good leg, but he managed it.

He thought with a startling clarity, despite his exhaustion, the body compensates for its losses.

He straightened and, using the shirt for

Ballard, the doctor without a practice, was the only one who could save the town that had scorned him. . . .

a towel, rubbed his face and shoulders dry.

When he finished droplets of water dripped from his long dark hair, ran down across his naked back. They felt cold in the morning freshness and he put the damp shirt back on, buttoning it slowly. From where he stood he could see the tan bulk of the Coyoteros, massive foothills lumping together like huge dead cattle in the haze of dawn.

With a tired sigh he turned to the house, wondering about the life he had delivered within it, and seeing the vast isolation beyond.

And the thought came to him again, a man need not live in a desert to be alone.

He was standing in that manner, facing the open land, when Will Ferguson came out of the thatched stable and walked toward him. Ferguson's sallow face was drawn, and the odor of whisky was heavy on him.

He hasn't slept, Ballard thought, but not because of her.

Ballard said, "You've got a daughter, Will. You're a lucky man."

Ferguson's eyes were dull. He spoke thickly.

"I needed a son. Not a daughter."

"You need some coffee," Ballard said flatly.

"I know one thing I don't need," Ferguson said. "Advice from you."

Ballard watched him and said nothing. He finished buttoning his shirt. It was a long ride back to Cerrillo.

"I'll be back tomorrow," he said.

Ferguson shook his head and wiped a dirty hand across his mouth.

"No, you won't. Zulla wanted you. Not me." Ferguson's lips thinned as he spoke. "One of these days, Ballard, we'll have your kind out of this country." Then it seemed he thought of something for his eyes lighted. "Guess you didn't hear Red Sleeves had a brush with some of your blue-bellies. Tore into a whole passel of 'em at Apache Pass." He chuckled. "You blue-bellies never could take 'Paches—or Rebs."

AFTER Ferguson went into the house, Ballard stood there, feeling empty-stomached and tired. The night had drawn more from him than he had been prepared or able to lose. Limping, he moved to the ramada and saddled-up, leading the horse back to the house. Ferguson appeared in the doorway and tossed a stained campaign hat and a small satchel into the dust.

Ballard felt the blood drain from his face. He hobbled over, picked up his kit and the hat. He thought, you're a fool, helping these people. He slapped the dust from the hat and, using his good left leg, mounted.

Ferguson called from the doorway:

"They say Red Sleeve's got a string of ears for decoration, Ballard. Half Mex and half Yank."

It was a sort of private joke and the man laughed. Ballard started out of the yard.

"Keep your eyes open!" Ferguson shouted. "You blue-bellies look twice as ugly without ears."

The parting shot followed Ballard until he was out of sight of the straggling patch Ferguson had grubbed from the desert. Then, as if the gray openness invited comment, the words began to rankle because of the knowledge of the man from which they came.

Whisky and a hatred of hard work had taken everything from Ferguson except meanness and the filth on his tongue. Ballard bore the rankling silently, knowing the irritation would burn out finally like a worn nettle and fall into place among the other half-forgotten memories of bitterness that were about all he had left.

It was treatment he had come to expect in this last year and, by expecting, tried to let it run off like rain on a rock. Only he was enough of a doctor to know that when they had held him down in the stench of the dressing station at Bull Run they had taken more than his leg—they had breached the hardness each man likes to think belongs to him alone, and now the bitterness flushed through like troops through a sallyport.

Ballard wiped his eyes. They stung and he could feel the itching dried sweat on his body. His leg—or rather the part that began at the knee where the wood and straps ended—began to pain with sharp stabs.

All night, he thought. A half-man trying to help a lost woman and a forgotten child.

The old doubts began to gnaw at Wade Ballard and the wonder as to why he had returned to the baked emptiness of Cerrillo.

And he knew the answer as always. It was home, and he had come back because there was nothing else left.

The part of him that mattered he had left at the blocked bridge above Bull Run. He had turned down a hospital berth and its extra sixty dollars a month for field duty where he'd shared half of a filthy tent, and beacuse of it he was a soldier broken on the eve of war with nothing left but the rawness healing at his knee and the mustering out papers in his tunic. The part that remained could only sit and watch and do nothing.

Then Ferguson's face rose before him and what he knew of Red Sleeves rose with it and he thought, they are of a piece. It was a sobering comparison, and Ballard let himself think again of the pain in his leg.

It pushed all else out of his mind, as always, and he pulled the worn campaign hat lower over his eyes and let himself slump in the saddle, his thoughts empty and alone. . . .

Cerrillo was a double row of adobes and gray shacks, with corrals and sheds on the outskirts. Toward the west where the land splintered into deep arroyos and the vast drywash of Bear Canyon, several abandoned barracks huddled around what was left of a brush-grown parade.

From the window of his office at the edge of town, Wade Ballard could look out and watch the tumbleweed roll across the packed earth where troops had once answered muster. With the coming of war, the Union had abandoned such outposts to the wind and the coyotes.

BALLARD sat there now, watching the dust swirl on the distant earth, remembering himself as a boy running there and talking to the men by the stables. After all these years it still held a fascination for him and he would sit watching for hours, good leg and bad propped on the table before him.

The knock on the door was loud against the faint cry of the wind.

"It's open," Ballard said, and a girl came in, her hand pushing at her dress where the wind had caught it. "Pru—" he said and started to shift himself to his feet.

She stopped him, holding his legs gently with her other hand.

"No, Wade," she said. "I know you're tired. How is Zulla?"

"As good as can be expected," Ballard said. "It was a girl." His jaw tightened slightly. "It's a dirty place to raise a girl."

Pru frowned and came forward and sat on the table. She was slender, and her eyes were soft and disturbed.

"You don't like Will Ferguson, do you?"

Ballard shrugged. "Each man chooses his own life, Pru. I have no opinion."

Pru Carter rose and walked to the window and Ballard saw that her eyes followed the line of his feet toward the abandoned fort. Then she turned, her hands pressed against the dusty window sill.

"Why do you stay here, Wade? Cerrillo means nothing to you any more."

"It means you."

She looked down, and Ballard swung to his feet and pushed himself erect. It was a step to the window and he stood an inch or so from her, not touching her. She made no motion, and then she reached out and held him.

"Does it mean me, Wade?" she asked. "Or is it because your pride won't let you leave?" She hesitated, looking up, searching his eyes. "If I were sure, Wade, I'd go with you tomorrow. But I'm not. You're different now. You've changed."

"All men change," Ballard said, and his hand dropped to brush his leg. She caught the motion and her eyes blazed.

"You think that stops me?" He felt the

pressure of her small fingers on his arms. "It's you, Wade—how you act, how you feel. It's as if you sit in judgment on us all. You're needed here. Cerrillo needs a doctor—but not like the one you've become."

Ballard listened quietly, then he shook his head.

"I'm no doctor, Pru. I'm a backwoods sawbones set out in the sun to dry like a ripped-up piece of beef."

"That's wrong, and you know it! They didn't give you a medical degree for nothing, Wade. You know more than any doctor in the Territory."

"How many doctors are there in the Territory? Three veterinarians and an Apache medicine man." He cast a thumb toward the window where Cerillo's main street dozed under the late morning heat. "They'd rather have the medicine man."

She pushed away from the window, close against him.

"Politics have nothing to do with pain and suffering, Wade. They need you, and they'll forget. Give them time. You were in the Army only three months."

"Three months too long for the good people of Cerrillo," he said. "I could walk down Main Street with nothing on but a breechclout and they'd still see Union blue on me."

HE TURNED away from her and hobbled back to the table. He leaned forward, putting his weight on his knuckled-up fists. He stared at the opposite wall, at the bottles of pharmaceuticals there, his eyes hard and distant.

"It's no use, Pru," he said. "I'm tired of knowing people are sick and dying and being stopped at my door. I'm sick of children crying and not being allowed to help."

His right fist rose an inch above the desk and came down hard. White lines tugged hard at the corners of his mouth and across his dark forehead.

"I'm sick to the teeth of this rotten place," he said.

"Wade," Pru said, "you've got to try and understand them."

"A year, Pru, and it's no different." He turned and looked at her. "How long does a man have to try, even if he's a doctor?"

"And what of me, Wade?" She spoke softly.

He shifted, leaning his body against the desk and she stepped close. He reached out for her. His lean hands tightened on her arms. He felt her begin to strain toward him and he held her the length of a forearm away, then dropped his arms.

She said, "Are you turning me away, too?"

"Stanton Carter has a right to honesty," he said. "I can't fight him and love you at the same time."

She stiffened. "My father is a Southerner, Wade. He believed in their cause, just as you did in yours."

Ballard watched her, then went to a shelf on the far wall. He returned with his doctor's shabby case. Opening it, he emptied the contents on the table. A scalpel honed almost to nothingness fell out along with worn probes and blunted scissors.

"Three times I've ordered new instruments, Pru. Three times my shipment was stolen by Apaches." Ballard frowned. "The only trouble is I've never seen the burned wagons the Apaches were supposed to have left behind, and no store here in Cerrillo has ever run out of supplies."

Pru's eyes flashed, her cheeks reddened. "You have no cause to accuse my father, Wade!"

"His freight wagons bring in the only supplies," Ballard said. "No Apache steals just one thing. It's all or nothing."

Pru gripped the edge of the table.

"What do you know of Apaches? You were sitting in school a thousand miles away when those savages were burning settlements out here. My mother's dead because of Apaches." Her lips quivered and her hand went to her mouth.

"Pru," Ballard said, "you misunderstand."

She tore away from the table and shook her head, violently.

"No!" she cried. "I understand all too

well. You want no part of us." She yanked open the door. "And we want no part of you!"

She was gone then, the awareness of her still harsh on Wade Ballard's senses. In a sort of half-daze, he limped to the window, the dragging stiffness of his artificial leg irritating him.

Suddenly to Wade Ballard the aching nothingless beneath his right hip seemed a fearful monstrosity. He pushed away from the window savagely, bending to clutch with hard fingers at the wooden, nerveless stump, feeling a desperate need to tear it free and send it crashing through the glass.

Only once before had he felt such emptiness—the second day after the doctors had done their work and he lay in the damp field station, staring with blinking eyes at the abrupt sag in the blankets. Around him men had groaned and shifted in pain. From outside had came the weary surgeon's cry, "Next!" and he had thought of the horrible pile beside the tent and of the pinned-up trousers and the empty sleeves and the cautious pressure of a man's arm around the woman he loves, as he feels the instinctive pity and loathing in her lips. Ballard had turned into his blankets then and sobbed until he slept.

Now he stood by the window, his eyes dry and his hands tight against his leg. He knew his decision. . . .

THE noon sun was a baking eye of fire directly overhead, leaving pitiful uneven circles of shadow under horse and man as they moved between the dozing buildings. Ballard's right leg hung free, his battered medical case dangled from the pommel. His hat was drawn forward and he moved the horse at a slow walk. The few men who lounged under the store fronts watched him with disinterest.

Unnoticed and without regret, Ballard thought. These people had held him at rifle length and they would forget him as easily as a half-remembered pain. And he thought, I leave you to your herbs and your sassafras tea and your medicine men.

He neared Cerrillo's lone saloon, a sagging-roofed structure, with the inevitable bat-wing doors and crumbling adobe walls, and the vague murmur of men drifting out into the street. And before it, tied to a splintered hitching-rail were a scattering of horses, standing hip-shot and head down in the heat.

Idly, Wade Ballard glanced at them, feeling sorry for their patience and seeing the flies settling on their twitching flanks in the sun, rising under the swish of a weary tail and then settling to bite and crawl again. The sight bothered him as always.

As a doctor, he felt discomfort and suffering with his patients, felt their uneasiness and their fear with an acuteness. A good doctor is as cold as a corpse, he had told himself. You must know your business and do it and not hear or feel, for it is for the best. And he could never believe it.

A rib-scant claybank shifted under the cloud of flies at the end of the rail and as Ballard came opposite, snorted and shifted its feet in the thick dust. The motion drew Ballard's eye. He had almost passed on, when he turned back with a start. Quickly, he found himself looking for the brand and saw the uneven circle slash on the hip. It was Ferguson's mount.

Out of the saloon rolled a burst of heavy laughter and there was a faint clink of glass on glass. "I wanted a son, Ballard, not a daughter." And now a man was finding retreat and forgetfulness in the cool, whisky-dampened shadows while out in the heat a woman struggled to rise from a bed, her lips parched and her body feverish, and a child cried raggedly among sweat-stained sheets.

A coldness swept Ballard and he dropped out of saddle, easing his good leg to the ground. He limped inside the saloon.

A few men sat at a rickety table, throwing out thumb-dirtied cards with lazy boredom. Two more stood at the plank bar, leaning on their elbows, a bottle between them. Another man sat in the corner, a cigar in his mouth, dark hat well

down over his face. Ballard glanced at them all, then came back to the two at the bar, recognizing Ferguson's scrawny leanness.

"Ferguson," Ballard said.

The lean back stiffened and the man turned slowly, his eyes growing angry as they found Ballard. Ferguson's fingers tightened on the glass in his hand.

"Well," he said. "The blue-belly sawbones."

Ferguson's tone quieted the drone of voices. A man with a cigar rose and came forward—Pru's father, Stanton Carter. Ballard shifted his attention back to Ferguson.

"Don't you think the celebrating could wait, Ferguson?"

Ferguson grinned. "Whisky's good any time," he said and laughed, and there was an answering murmur from the others. Then he sobered. "It's Zulla's baby, blue-belly. Let her take care of it herself."

STANTON CARTER, standing at Ferguson's elbow, spoke up. His cigar champed in his heavy-lipped mouth. It was hard to see the resemblance between this flabby man and Pru.

"Now, Ballard," Carter said placatingly, "Ferguson's just been made a father. Man's got a right to celebrate that."

Ballard turned to him. "He'll be a man without a wife, *or* a child, if he stays here. Zulla's a sick woman."

"For a lobo blue-belly," Ferguson snarled, "you sure know a lot about my wife."

"It looks to me, Ballard," Stanton Carter said, "that you're interfering."

"A doctor has his duty," Ballard said.

Ferguson chuckled nastily. "Then why ain't you with the rest of the blue-bellies, doing it?"

Ballard had known it would come back to this. Always to this, and he looked past Ferguson and saw the open hate in Stanton Carter's eyes. Around the saloon the bitter dislike was as tangible as the sour odor of stale liquor and dirty sawdust. Ballard faced Ferguson for a final time. "If Zulla loses the baby," he said flatly, "I'll come back here, Will, and horsewhip you."

Ferguson's mouth twitched, then his fingers deliberately tipped his glass and whisky splashed out, running across the plank. Ballard felt it wash his fingers and soak his sleeve where he leaned on the bar. He stood there, not moving, the whisky turning his arm wet and sticky, then he put his weight on his left leg and without warning brought his hand off the bar and slapped it across Ferguson's grinning face.

The scrawny man went backward, going down on one knee, his face mottled with surprise, his hat falling to the sawdust. He stayed there, half-crouched, his hand to his face where Ballard's open fingers had left a wide, red splotch. Then he grinned tightly and his hand went to his holster, his fingers closing on his gunbutt. Ballard straightened, feeling a hot disgust for the man.

Then Carter stepped forward and grabbed Ferguson's sleeve.

"Don't be a fool," Carter warned. "He's unarmed. This isn't the time." Carter looked at Ballard. "You'd better get out of here. You're not wanted in Cerrillo. Next time I won't stop him."

"Next time," Ballard said, "you won't have to."

In bitter silence, he made his way over the sawdust-littered floor and out into the brilliant heat of the street. He pulled himself up into his saddle and turned his horse south. He thought, It is time either to leave Cerrillo or get a gun, and he was suddenly sick of the fact. After the biggest killing of them all, the war, where he had thought killing had spent itself, it had come back to killing again. Dully he reined the horse out of the town, heading for the low and empty hills. . . .

The baby gripped his fingers with that aimless tightness that all infants display and Ballard smiled down at it. Zulla Ferguson reached out with a weary hand for Ballard's own strong, brown one.

"Thank you for coming back." Her voice was faint. "I don't know where Will is."

[*Turn to Page 96*]

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Her words trailed off and Ballard sought her eyes and found the question in them, and he said to her, "He loves you, Zulla. You and the baby."

Her eyes gleamed faintly with a sort of embarrassed gratitude, and Ballard turned away and walked to the door. The heat of the yard beyond was the blast from an oven of dust and desert, and the shimmering haze made things move in the thatched ramada where Ferguson kept his horses.

BALLARD put his hand to his eyes, feeling the gritty fatigue in them. He pressed his fingers against the lids, the pressure giving him painful darkness for an instant.

Above him, he knew, over the doorway was Ferguson's rifle. He had instinctively looked for it an hour ago when he had ridden into the yard. Zulla had roused from a feverish, drugged slumber to grope for him and hold onto him and as he had comforted her, his eyes had searched the room and he had seen the gun.

He knew that he would be staying until Zulla could walk and tend the child. Cerrillo was behind him, with its sickness and hate, but he could not leave this woman and her child. They still needed him and because of them he refused to leave. But I know where the rifle is now, he thought, and if Ferguson tries to put me out, I'll kill him.

His lips felt dry and swollen and he realized he had neither eaten nor drunk since the night before. The knowledge surprised him, and the thought that he could forget was unsettling. He dropped his hand from his eyes and, blinking, walked across the sunlit yard to the well.

The stones were hot to the touch when he reached for the rope and let the bucket drop downward with a distant splash. He waited, blinking through the heat, while it filled, seeing the shimmering dust-devils scurry through the nearby brush. Then he turned and lifted the bucket, and thrust his face into the cool water, and drank deeply.

The wetness was welcome and he shoved both hands into it and threw more water over his face and onto his hair, straightening to comb his fingers through it. As he did, his eyes, blinking in the water running down his face, watched the shimmering dust roll out of the ramada and grow into a man. Two men. And another across the yard. And still another.

Ballard left his hands where they were, flat against the dripping wetness of his head. Beside him, the sloshing bucket let water splash to the ground and in the sudden stillness the drops made loud sounds as they hit the dusty earth beside the well.

There were seven Apaches in all, facing him. Knee-length moccasins, breechclouts, small-muscled bodies and black, suspicious eyes on either side of broad, dark noses. Colored bands of cloth held back thick, black hair, and each wore a knife and held a rifle.

For a moment longer Ballard kept his glance tightly on them, then he shifted it slightly, measuring the distance across the yard to the door and the rifle above the door, just inside. And he thought, You'd be a dead man before you took three steps.

Finally he spoke, slowly and clearly. "I have no weapon."

A stocky, long-armed Apache stepped carefully around the well and looked him over quickly. Then he snapped a guttural order and two of the warriors slipped inside the house. Ballard made a half-step forward and felt the Apache's rifle jam against his stomach.

"Woman in the house," Ballard said. "Sick. *Muy malo.* Baby."

The last word caught the Indian's attention and he hesitated a moment, then shoved Ballard forward. Ballard went limpingly and the Apache's eyes narrowed, watching. Suddenly Ballard heard a muffled scream and he threw himself for the door. The Apache yelled behind him and the rifle caught him under the ribs. He fell headlong inside the doorway, gasping for air.

There was an angry mutter and he dragged himself up from the floor to see

one of the Apaches with Ferguson's rifle and the other standing by Zulla. The one who had hit him stood facing him.

Zulla's face was drawn. Her arms were about the baby.

Ballard said, "It's all right, Zulla. Don't worry."

The Apache before him nodded.

"We will not harm the woman," he said in thick English. "We want you."

Ballard frowned at the pointing finger aimed at his own chest.

"Me? I don't understand."

THE Apache made no answer. Instead he walked to the rude chair beside Zulla's bed. Zulla stared at him, her fingers trembling over the child's face. The Indian reached for the battered medical kit on the chair, held it out to Ballard.

"Yours." It was a statement of fact.

Ballard nodded, and the Apache went to the door and called loudly. Then he turned and beckoned to Ballard. One of the Apaches by the bed pointed meaningfully at Zulla with the rifle. Ballard went outside.

From beyond the ramada, a string of rides were coming, Apaches all of them, riding easy on their small ponies. Riding in from the heat and emptiness of the desert to fill the lonely ranch yard with ponies and silent, dark-eyed men.

From their center two riders approached the adobe house. One was a gray-haired, wrinkled Indian, with a face dark as weathered hide, and pebbles of lava rock for eyes. He rode with one hand on the thong reins. The other was held tightly about his waist and there the clotted redness of blood had soaked his shirt and covered the flank of the horse beneath with a wet paste. The pony's nostrils flared and Ballard could see the tendons twist in the old man's hand as he fought the blood-frightened horse.

Ballard watched them come and thought he had the answer for their coming. It was on the dried age of the old Apache and his silent milling riders. It was there in the yard, in the ready rifles, the half-empty cartridge belts, the nearness of Apaches to a town the size of Cerrillo. And still Ballard asked the question.

"What man rides wounded?"

Beside him the Apache turned and held out his doctor's kit. He watched Ballard carefully.

"Mangas Colorado," he said. "Red Sleeves."

With a cold and biting reality, Ballard watched the old Apache ride up and stop, watching Ballard with unblinking eyes. Feeling a growing numbness in his chest, Ballard stepped down from the doorway and walked to the nervous horse, looking up at the old chief on the animal's back.

"I am a doctor," Ballard said, knowing it was unnecessary.

Red Sleeves looked down and with a slow, uncoiling motion pulled his red hand away from his side. Ballard felt his own hands go stiff, and he tried to keep his eyes on the clotted wound as he probed.

The wound was deep. A rifle bullet with a soft nose had come at an angle from the rear, tearing a gaping hole just under the ribs. Ballard saw the white ends of bone, broken ribs thrusting out among the bleeding flesh, and he wonder how a human being with a wound like that could have made it across the desert on a horse.

The old warrior gave a single command and started to lean over, drawing up one long, stringy-muscled leg to dismount. Ballard reached for the leg and pressed it hard against the horse. Instantly, a rifle barrel was in his back, another at his throat, and the Apache who spoke English was at his side.

"You touch a mighty *jefe*, white man. That is unwise."

Ballard took a deep breath and said carefully, "He needs help, but I cannot give it."

The Apache's eyes snapped. "You lied when you said you were a white man's doctor?"

"No," Ballard said. "I did not lie."

"Then you help Red Sleeves."

The Indian held the black bag under Ballard's nose and Ballard heard the few

instruments within clink faintly together. An old scalpel, a dull probe, a gathering of nothing to treat a wound that needed a hospital. And if he failed—

THE THOUGHT of Zulla in the house, and of the baby, and the pictures were ugly ones. He had found a child once, a skeleton of one where it had been thrown alive in a bed of dagger-skewered cactus. He raised his eyes toward Red Sleeve. The old man still sat unmoved, but a greenish pallor was setting over his skin and his eyes fought glassiness. He's going into shock.

Ballard thought, and when he does he'll die, and so will we.

He said to the Apache with his bag, "Get him off the horse and bring him into the house. I will try to help him."

The Apache said something and Ballard turned toward the house. On what he did now would depend Zulla's life, and the child's. And his own.

He limped through the watching Apaches, his mind full of what he would need—a table, a sharp blade, bandages. And then it hit him. The surgical kits he had ordered, that had never arrived. Could they be in Cerrillo, somewhere in Carter's warehouse, hidden and forgotten? If he had them, there in his own office—

Ballard spun and threw up his arm. A knot of Apaches who had been helping Red Sleeves down from the horse stopped and the Apache with the medical kit stared at Ballard suspiciously.

"Wait!" Ballard shouted. "Listen to me. . . ."

It had been a dusty job, filthy beyond belief, searching the accumulated debris in Carter's warehouse and the sheds beyond. But the kits had been found, buried deep beneath boxes of rusty tools. Ballard had held his find out to the Apache who had come with him, and they went out into the street and across it toward Ballard's office.

With almost grim humor Ballard saw the pulled blinds and closed doors, the tight groups of silent, dour men who stood under the wooden awnings. Far up the street, and here and there along its length, sat Apaches on horseback, impassive and quiet, rifles held lightly. There was no sound save an occasional *plop* of a pony's hoof or a dust devil scurrying along the weathered buildings.

Inside his office, Ballard stood beside the table on which they had lain Red Sleeves. The ride from Ferguson's had opened the wound. It was bleeding freely. The old warrior opened his eyes and looked up at Ballard. Ballard nodded and opened one of the new surgical bags.

In Red Sleeve's hand, Ballard knew, lay the fate of Cerillo and the people in it. Even if he closed it in death, the same dead hand would fall on the street outside, and there would be nothing of Cerrillo after that, only blackened timbers and sprawled figures.

And then suddenly, as Ballard bent forward, the heat in the small room coating him with sweat, there was a commotion outside the door. Two Apaches broke in, flinging a girl before them. She pushed them off, her lips tight with strain.

"Pru!" Ballard said. "Of all the crazy—"

She gripped his arm. "You can't do this alone."

"I must," Ballard said, and reached for the kit on the table next to him.

As he did he put his weight unconsciously on his false leg, and went offbalance. Pru threw out her arms and he fell against her roughly. She helped him straighten up.

Ballard said, "I need boiling water, Pru. Get me a kettle of it, and tell them to keep the fire going."

Then he wiped the sweat from his eyes, blinked hard, and bent over the old Indian. . . .

THEY were going, the long string of ponies trudging north from the town, the dust rising without sound under their hooves. Red Sleeves rode in their lead, a warrior on either side, and though he rode in silence, head down and eyes closed, he rode whole and unbleeding.

Wade Ballard stood in the street, one

hand on Pru's arm, watching the Apaches file out of Cerrillo. Red stains spotted his clothes and he felt drained and empty, but with it was a strange feeling of strength, an emotion of duty accomplished.

The townspeople were drifting out like white-faced ghosts from the stores and buildings, staring. Doors opened and people moved down into the street. Ballard watched them, knowing they had seen the shadow of death in that street and that now it was leaving.

And then something made Ballard turn and look toward the saloon. Ferguson was there, scrawny frame crouching in the alley, a bottle in one hand, a rifle in the other. As Ballard watched, a sudden fear dawning, Ferguson let the bottle drop, its amber contents spilling out. Ferguson raised the rifle and leveled its sights on the column of Apaches.

"Ferguson!" Ballard yelled and lunged forward, hobbling. With a terrible swiftness the Apaches had halted and were turning. From their lead rode the subchief who had first found Ballard.

Ferguson cursed and fired. His aim was wild, and a bullet smacked the wall above his head. He spun on Ballard, swinging up the riflle again.

Then the Apache was drumming past, riding low. He threw a rifle at Ballard. For an instant horse and Indian were between the two white men, then they were gone. Ferguson saw Ballard grab the rifle and he fired a second time.

The slug smashed into Ballard and he went down. Only as he did he felt no pain and knew the false limb had saved him. He drew the rifle in close and rolled, seeing a spinning whirl of ponies and dust. He came to a stop on his belly, the rifle swerving toward the alley.

Ferguson came out, waving and cursing, the weapon in his hands held low as he fired with mad abandon. A bullet raked dirt beside Ballard's head, another chewed into his side, lashing fire along his ribs and burrowing into the ground.

Ballard squeezed the trigger, and Ferguson dropped to one knee, blood spurting from his hip. Ferguson yelled and Ballard, with almost a surgical precision, aimed again. The rifle spun from Ferguson's hands, the man's fingers stabbed the air and went red from a hole in Ferguson's wrist. And Ferguson fell forward in the dust, twisting and groaning.

Then voices were around Ballard and Pru's face was there and beyond her was Stanton Carter. Only there was no blackness in the faces, only strain and concern. Ballard felt gentle hands go under him and raise him up, and on all the faces were smiles, and hate was gone.

And then past them, sitting a wiry-muscled pony, came an Apache, holding a rifle, looking down. There was no expression, no emotion on that face, but as Ballard looked up and their eyes met, the Apache raised a dust-covered rifle and shook it once, then turned the pony and rode off after the others.

Ballard watched him go and his eyes dropped to the shattered mess that Ferguson's bullet had made of his false leg, at the splintered wood and wire and straps. A man can be thankful, he thought, and he found himself smiling.

A man could be truly thankful.

Look Forward to Gun-Roaring Thrills in—

A MAN CALLED LONESOME

Next Month's Gripping Novelet by ART BAKER

Bear Fighter

A True Story By Lauran Paine

JOE MEEK was born about 1810. He left the States for Indian Country in somewhat of a hurry and didn't learn to read or write, but this negligible liability never troubled him. In fact, he did start to study up on these arts one winter when trapping was slow and the nights long but lost interest when the nubile daughter of a Snake chieftain took his eye. Reading was all right, so was writing, but this was better. However Milton Sublette married the girl and Joe tagged along until Milton went back to the States on a trip, then Joe married her, too.

A mountain man at the age of twenty, Joe's life would make breathtaking reading. Strong, lithe and supple, with an incredible sense of humor, he trapped, fought Indians, accumulated wives and hunted with the best of them.

Once, while with Milton Sublette and their "mutual" wife, he and the others were reduced to drinking the blood from their pack-mules a little at a time so as not to weaken the animals too much and yet keep themselves alive. Another time, starving, Joe put his hands into an ant hill until the aroused insects literally cov-

ered his fingers, then deliberately raised the hands up and ate every last ant! While Joe, like all mountain men, despised the "Digger" Indians for their filth, he was once forced to adopt their method of catching hundreds of the black crickets, baking them and making several meals of this mess.

Joe's philosophy is best shown by the reply he made when, full to the bung on trade whisky and in a camp with other trappers, traders and mountain men where a rabid wolf made several forays that resulted in several horrible deaths of men—including one sleeping Indian—he was told he shouldn't be too drunk to shoot, should the animal reappear.

"I expect he might get to me, at that," was Joe's reply, "but on the other hand he might just damned well be cured by biting me, too."

Fast-footed Fighter

Joe's sense of humor included the time he rode into a camp deep in hostile Indian country, set up his horse at a camp and let out the yell "Indians!" The resultant confusion and clamor as the trappers scrambled about for guns and cover almost left Joe breathless. So also, did the near beating he got before he managed to talk the less amused trappers out of same, after they discovered it was all just a joke.

As a bear hunter Joe had no equal. These were grizzlies, not brown or cinnamon bears. Grizzlies that weighed upwards of five-hundred pounds of bellicose ferocity, ready and willing to fight anything, any time, anywhere.

One time Joe annoyed a grizzly by shooting it in the rump and was promptly obliged to climb like crazy into a tall tree when the bear turned out to have a friend close by. While the wounded bear tried to shake Joe out of the tree, Joe's astonished companion, still in his bed-robes by the fire, raised up and found himself staring the other grizzly in the eye. Joe clung to the tree for dear life and shouted advice to his friend. This advice was to lie perfectly still and bury deep into the robes. Sound enough advice to a man paralyzed with fear. Nothing came of this escapade, but Joe was less fortunate the time he and his friend, Hawkins, killed a grizzly on a little island in the river, took off their clothes, clutched their knives and swam over to skin the beast.

THE "killed" bear wasn't dead by a damned sight. It leaped up, let out a wild roar and took after Meek and Hawkins who beat a hasty retreat, naked as jaybirds. Joe was way out ahead when they hit the river with a splash and swam like they were born to the water. This proved to be of vast amusement to some other trappers who had come up when the bear roared.

Another time, in company with some trappers named Doughty and Claymore, and still with his irrepressible buddy, Hawkins, Joe found an old grizzly and chased it into a cave. They all raced into the cave to finish the animal—only to find there were three immense grizzlies already in there with their doddering old bear. Once more the foot race was grim and in earnest, and again Joe outstripped all others, leading by a good fifty yards when the bears gave up and went back, winded but triumphant.

Joe's final bear escapade was when he and a hot-tempered little man named Markhead were riding in from trapping. Joe saw a big she-grizzly with a prime coat and offered to get her if Markhead would hold the horses. This role had definite appeal to Markhead, so he agreed. Joe crept up close, raised up, stared the old girl in the eye and squeezed the trigger. Trouble was, the gun misfired and Mrs. Grizzly—who had cubs at her feet—accepted the challenge pronto and took after Joe. The grizzly was gaining as Joe ran toward the horses and Markhead swallowed his own indignation, adopted prudence instead, leaped aboard and raced away.

Joe was wearing an old blanket-cape sort of thing and it was standing straight out behind. The old bitch-bear got her claws in it and Joe had a brief tug-of-war before the cape came apart. Joe then managed to re-cap his rifle and ram it into

her mouth. But before he could pull the trigger the bear knocked it aside as it went off, took the slug in her shoulder and got madder.

Joe now had a useless gun, but just then one of the cubs came up and got into the melee. The bear turned aside and cuffed him away, still holding onto Joe, then resumed her wrestling match with him. He threw the gun down and managed to get out his knife, which she promptly knocked out of his hand—along with half a finger. Then the other cub came in to join what appeared to be real sport and the harassed old-girl had to turn and box his ears too, which gave Joe his last chance and he took it. Snatching his hatchet from his belt he swung with all his might and buried the thing to the handle in the grizzly's head.

Routing Redskins

Joe never saw the statue in wax someone made of this fight which stood in St. Louis for many years, related by Markhead, nor is it clear that he would have approved because the story became something that followed him forevermore, amid howling laughter.

Joe was also in the fight when Doc Newell, another mountain man, shot a Blackfoot warrior from his horse. Doc jumped down to scalp the buck and grasped the man's topknot, only to find himself with a very live Indian on his hands. Amazed, Joe and the other trappers watched while Doc cursed and succeeded in what he had to do a second time—kill the pesky redskin.

JOE later married a Nez Perce woman (who bore him eight children) and went to Oregon. One time, after leading a group of volunteers across a river, in the heavily forested Burnt River country of Eastern Oregon, they came upon a band of hostile Indians. Joe was riding a mule that refused to be affected by spurring, clubbing or swearing. Sighting the Indians as they came out of the freshly crossed river, Joe's "volunteers" turned and fled back across again. Joe tried to make the mule cross the river once more but the animal couldn't see the sense of it, so there he sat, alone, watching his companions splash away. He cried:

"Come back and fight! There's not more'n a dozen of 'em. We can whip the tar out of 'em."

But the volunteers paid no heed and kept going in full retreat. Supposedly, they had come out to guard some emigrants from just such emergencies.

The Indians let loose a salvo of arrows and one struck Joe's mule in the derriere. The animal then changed his mind and plunged down the sidehill, leaped into the river and raced across, passing many of the volunteers en route, while Joe twisted backwards in the saddle and beckoned them to hurry after him.

"Come on, boys," he shouted. "We can't whip 'em, after all. There's over a thousand of 'em. Run for it!"

Joe's trip into California was an eye-opener for him. Everywhere else in the West a horsethief was killed on the spot. But in California you could take what you wanted of the countless animals and had the blessing of the owner.

Too, according to Joe, California women were "well-formed, with languishing eyes and soft voices." Joe doesn't go along with Ruxton (who says without batting an eyelash that the mountain men never "offended their modesty at all") and in fact, says that, where parents and others were stubborn, the girls had to be lassoed once in a while, but not too often, to insure companionship for these hardy men.

But Joe Meek's breed died out with the coming of the great emigrant trains, the settler and gold-seekers. Like others of his kind, he turned inland again, seeking the forests and plains where a man could shoot a buck without killing someone's cow, and so he rode out of the colorful history of our land and became a legend that, today, is all but forgotten. While he lived and rode, trapped, explored, hunted and fought, Joe Meek was an epitome of his kind; a breed apart and nearly extinct now—all man, every inch of him—"all the way to Green River."

"This ain't no fight of yours," Charley said

ONE-MAN REVOLT

By ED MONTGOMERY

Charley Freeley wasn't easy

riled, but there was just so

much a man could take before

he began to take things apart

IF CHARLEY FREELEY had been a better judge of character there never would have been any rebellion. Because they wouldn't have had any chance to stock-law his quarterhorse and try to force him into bankruptcy over a four-dollar bar bill.

It was Charley being so bad wrong about Pants Powers that brought Nellie

Adams into the picture in the first place. She came into it sitting beside her father on the seat of a spring wagon that had about a dozen horses tied to different parts of it.

Charley noticed this bay mare before he noticed Nellie, which shows right there he didn't have the gumption to work up an insurrection unless somebody plumb forced him into it. There's probably never been a more overrated revolutionist than Charley Freeley.

Well, Charley ambled over as soon as Matt Adams stopped the wagon, but Matt got busy fussing with a tire that might be working loose, and wouldn't hardly look at him.

Charley barely glanced at the slick little mare, and Old Suise didn't let on she knew him.

"Been kind of looking for a saddle horse," Charley suggested.

Matt turned around slowly and shook his head. "Just out of trading horses," he said. "These here's some I was aiming to keep."

"That sorrel pony there. He ain't a bad-looking little horse, excusing that mean look in his eye. Been used bad, probably, before you got 'im."

"Why, no," said Matt. "I believe that's the gentlest horse I ever saw. Matter of fact I kind of had it in mind to give 'im to my little four-year-old niece up in Kansas for her birthday."

Charley said he couldn't find it in his heart to deprive a little girl of a present and went on to another horse. Matt got out his knife, picked up a whittling board, and leaned back against the wagon wheel. Charley got his own knife and squatted down so he could draw lines in the dust, but he wasn't too confident. This Matt Adams had the look of a hard man to trade with, and his daughter was turning into a downright distraction.

Nellie Adams had grave brown eyes and a serious way of looking at a person, and Charley got the idea that if she ever smiled she would light up a man's life like a rainbow lights up the day after a long spell of rain.

HE DIDN'T look at Nellie any more than he could help, and he mentioned about every horse in the bunch before he came to Old Susie.

He said he might be interested in her as a means of cheap transportation, though she seemed pretty delicate for hard riding and looked to be getting along in years.

"We could hardly part with her," Nellie said then. "I raised her from a colt."

Charley nodded sympathetically, but if this had been anything in the world besides a horse trade that would have been a bald-faced lie. Charley knew, because he'd been waiting around this town for two days just for that mare to show up.

Only Susie was supposed to come to town rough and uncurried, as half of a pony team pulling Pants Powers' rickety wagon. That would be so that the local racing fans would not suspect she was probably the fastest thing at a quarter of a mile between the Red River and the Arkansas. Charley searched his soul for forgiveness for Pants Powers, and didn't find it.

The two days he'd spent waiting for him had already cost him pretty near all his horse had won in a successful tour across southern Kansas. Seemed like the boys in the back room of the Main Street Bar weren't interested in any method of whiling away the idle hours other than stud poker, played for table stakes.

Charley had been down to forty-seven dollars on the table and about that much more in his left boot when the sheriff had walked in that morning. The dealer at the moment had been a man who looked remarkably like Buck Wilhite, whose picture could be found in any post-office in Kansas. The dealer had tossed the cards in front of Charley and all the players had put their money in their pockets.

"Gambling," the sheriff had announced, "is against the law in this territory."

"It might be," Charley had sadly agreed, "but the way these boys play poker a man couldn't hardly call it gambling."

The sheriff had picked up Charley's money, counted it, and handed it to him. "You're under arrest, mister," he'd said.

Charley always was slow to get mad, but somehow that just rubbed him the wrong way. "What about these fellers that live in your town?" he'd asked. "They under arrest, too?"

"Far as I can see they wasn't gambling. No law against watching somebody else gamble."

"Then who you reckon I was gambling *with?*"

"The longer you sit there resisting arrest," the sheriff had said patiently, "the harder it's liable to go with you."

Strange as it seemed, Charley Freeley hadn't rebelled worth a cent at that point. He'd got up and quietly followed the sheriff across to the big building with a wooden sign on it that said, "Persimmon County Courthouse." The prosecuting attorney had been in the judge's chambers, waiting for business.

Charley had already heard that the prosecutor, Curt Beelson, was the boss of Persimmon County. But, as a man only mildly interested in political reform, he was more impressed by the fact that Beelson owned the fastest quarterhorse for miles around. And he turned out to be a big, beefy fellow with a real business-like way of acting.

"Now if you were to plead guilty," he'd said to Charley, "I think I could persuade the judge to let you off with a fine of—"

He'd paused and looked at the sheriff, who stepped up and whispered in his ear. Beelson had looked disappointed and cleared his throat.

"I believe I could prevail upon His Honor to let you off with a fine of forty-seven dollars," he'd said.

"Then I'll by gosh have me a jury trial." Charley had been firm.

"Be just fine," the county attorney had said. "Though it might get pretty tiresome in that cell by the time your trial comes up."

"Supposing I was to post bond."

"Be all right," the prosecutor had told him heartily, and looked at the judge.

"Bond would be forty-five dollars on the gambling," the judge had said, "and two dollars on the resisting."

The sheriff had smirked. "Such resisting arrest as people do in this county," he said, "ain't hardly ever serious."

IT SHOULD be plain enough that any self-respecting revolutionist would have had a fair-sized uprising halfway organized by the time things got that far along. Charley Freeley had just stared from one man to another, then shrugged.

"I'll plead guilty," he'd said, and contributed forty-seven dollars more to his misplaced trust in Pants Powers.

Now Pants Powers was known to be completely unreliable except where he stood to gain money by being reliable. His full name was Other Pants Powers because his other pants was where he had always left his money when it was time to pay for something. Charley had known him to leave his money in his other pants in Muskogee, Coffeyville, Amarillo and Oklahoma City.

But it had sure seemed reasonable to believe that he would stand hitched on a deal like this.

That had been this morning. Now a sad and disillusioned man, Charley sighed, finished drawing what might have been a girl's face in the dust beside Matt Adams's wagon, and looked up.

Matt was watching him with the look of an angler lowering a fish into the boat. Charley snapped his knife shut and got to his feet.

"How much would it cost to get you to forget about that bay mare being such a family pet?" he asked.

Matt Adams said such callousness was foreign to his soul, but he would try. He eventually overcame his better nature for Charley's good saddle horse and forty-four dollars which left Charley enough money to buy supper but not breakfast.

"How long you-all expect to be in town?" Charley asked.

"I expect we'll move right on," Matt said.

"Thought we might stay longer," Nellie spoke up to say.

Matt Adams looked at his daughter with those horse-trader's eyes of his and

nodded. "Business has been pretty good here so far," he admitted.

Which made Charley feel quite a bit better. He felt pretty good until after supper, which was when Pants Powers rode into town on the other half of the pony team. What made Charley feel so bad then was that he couldn't afford to shoot him.

Pants strolled over to the bench in front of the Main Street Bar and sat down beside his most recent victim.

"Ain't it hot!" he said to Charley conversationally.

"It'll be hotter in the jailhouse," Charley growled.

"Probably will, all right."

"I can get you there in five minutes."

"Better allow ten," Pants said reasonably. "Give you time for clearing up details."

"Justice moves real quick around here when it puts its mind to it," Charley said grimly. "And I can prove I owned that mare, and I've got the people you sold her to as witnesses."

"I know." Pants yawned. "But there's them other details. Like how come the horse that won all that money up in Kansas was pulling my wagon in the first place."

"Oh," Charley said, leaning back.

"Yonder is the courthouse"—Pants yawned—"the sheriff probably is working overtime, just hoping for somebody to bring 'im in a horse thief."

Charley didn't say anything. Pants got to his feet. "Come on," he said. "Buy you a drink."

Charley followed him inside. He wanted to stay close to Pants Powers so if he ever figured out a scheme to break his neck and get away with it there wouldn't be any time lost.

Pants rolled up his sleeves and drank three dollars and seventy cents worth of the best liquor in the house. Charley drowned his sorrows in thirty cents worth of beer, dreamed of a little ranch house occupied by a prosperous couple named Freeley and several brown-eyed little boys and girls, and made friends with Waymond, the barkeep. The barkeep had not always kept bar.

"Had me the nicest little start on a cow ranch you ever saw," he confided late in the evening. "Belongs to Curt Beelson now."

"How'd he do that?"

"Missent my tax notice, seems like. And I was too ignorant to miss it. Sold my land to himself at the tax sale."

By the time the evening was over Charley was pretty well up on conditions in Persimmon County. Beelson seemed to be a pretty ordinary kind of a thief, persistent but not too talented.

ONLY he was the one who said who got charged with breaking the law and who didn't. The district judge belonged to him and the other county officials were hand-picked or harmless.

"Works real good," Waymond told Charley. "You get a county fixed like that, especially if it's pretty far from the territorial capital and off the railroad and all, and nobody will bother you much."

"Looks like," Charley agreed.

"'Course you need some educated vote counters. And a couple of fellers to run off witnesses, or shoot 'em if they don't run off to suit you."

"Don't sound like such an awful good place to raise a family," Charley said thoughtfully.

"You fixin' to raise a family?"

"I doubt it," Charley said.

Which shows even Pants Powers couldn't teach a man like Charley Freeley much about human nature. Pants gave him another lesson, though, as soon as Waymond cleared his throat to say it was time to close up.

"Pay the man," Pants said over his shoulder. "Left my money in my other pants."

Even then Charley could not bring himself to shoot one of his fellowmen in the back. He arranged for four dollars' worth of credit with his new friend and went down to the wagon yard to sleep with his quarterhorse.

Next morning he got up before the sun

so he could sit with his back against the front of the blacksmith shop and worry about not having any money to bet on his horse. After that he worried quite a bit about not having any grain for his mare.

That brought him to his own breakfast, which he was just about to miss. He worried about that briefly and hurried on to worry about those poor little children who were in such serious danger of never getting born because their father was too sorry a man to marry their mother.

He wasn't through worrying about that yet when Nellie Adams came into sight.

She walked in front of the sunrise, which was as nice a sunrise as Charley had ever noticed, and that sunrise just wasn't in it. She moved nice and full of life, like a fox squirrel on a November meeting and when she got close she smiled.

It was easy to tell it wasn't near the smile she could have smiled, but it would keep anybody who saw it from ever being the same again, Charley was sure. He got to his feet and took his hat off, which wasn't enough to do but was all he could think of at the time.

Nellie Adams had that serious look again by now. But maybe that was because she wasn't used to having somebody gape at her like a fish getting put on a stringer.

"Well," she said, "are you going to let them get by with it?"

"What's that?" Charley asked cautiously.

"Oh, I heard what those politicians did to you. I don't want you to let them get by with it, you hear?"

"Why?" He asked it because he was just plumb puzzled.

"Well—" she faltered. "I just don't like to see people get by with things like that, that's all. Are you going to let them?"

"I might not," Charley said doubtfully. "I could get even with one of 'em about a hundred dollars' worth, right quick, if I could work out the financing."

She cocked her head like an interested puppy and nodded for him to go on.

"I don't reckon your dad would want to loan me a hundred dollars to work with, would he?"

She said her father wasn't best known as a quick man to loan money to strangers. "But go ahead," she said.

"Well, supposing that loan bought him a chance to bet some of his own money on a horse that beat every other fast horse in southern Kansas at every distance up to a half a mile."

"What's the horse look like?" Nellie asked, quick-like.

Charley got ready to duck. "Little bay mare," he said.

She took awhile to answer. Finally she said, "I guess Dad would think that anybody who could out-trade him *that* would be a pretty good investment. You wait."

SHE came back riding the sorrel pony, with a sack of oats across the saddle for Susie, and ten ten-dollar bills for Charley. He put the money in his pocket, fed the mare, and went looking for Pants Powers.

Pants got his knife out and backed up against the side of a store building when he saw him coming.

"It don't stand to reason," Charley told him, "that you can make more money selling out to Beelson than you can by keeping quiet and betting on my horse when the time comes."

"I've thought of that." Pants relaxed, but he didn't put the knife away. "Only I sure could use some more betting money."

"You've got what you sold my mare for, among other things."

"Maybe I have."

"Looks like you could maybe make it grow."

Pants nodded slowly. "I did see some men that looked like card players going in and out of the back room last night."

So Charley quit worrying about that end of it. He got back on his mare and took her around the courthouse to a dirt road. In five minutes he had a good audience watching from a courthouse window.

He had Susie trained to start just middling fast and step it up when you hit her

with the whip. But the thing that made her really get down and run, like a greyhound that's serious about catching a jackrabbit, was to yell in her ear that it was time to quit fooling around. The system wasn't much good in a race, because Susie couldn't stand to see another horse in front of her, but it was handy for times like this.

He did not yell in Susie's ear today. After the work-out he rode across the courthouse yard, and Beelson met him outside the back door.

"Nice-looking mare," Beelson said. "Done much racing?"

"The way she acts I doubt if she'd know a horse race from a Sunday school picnic."

"Looked pretty fast to me," observed the county attorney.

"I've seen more early foot on a Whiteface bull," Charley said disgustedly.

"Seemed to me like she started *awful* good."

"I think she's been some farmer's horse," Charley said. "If you look real close there you can still see the harness marks."

Beelson looked real close but he said he couldn't see any marks. "I've got a horse that'll run just a little bit," he said, "for about a quarter. Might be fun to see how bad your mare could beat 'im."

"It's good, clean sport," Charley agreed. "Unless somebody might start betting on it or something."

"That's right," Beelson said piously. "Though a *small* bet does kind of tend to make a horse race more interesting."

"Well, yes, I guess maybe it would. Though, personally, I'd have to get scandalous big odds to back this little old thing agin just *any* horse."

"I'd think a long time before I'd give you even money on that old plug of mine," Beelson said.

Eventually, though, he put up three hundred dollars aganist Charley's ten ten-dollar bills. They put the stakes in the county treasurer's safe and matched the race for the next afternoon. Charley went across to sit on the bench in front of the Main Street Bar and feel good about the three hundred dollars he nearly had.

He got ready to feel still better when Nellie Adams came riding down the street. But that old sorrel pony of hers sure was itching to make trouble for that little girl. He shied away from a tomato can that wasn't doing anything but just laying there, and started tossing his head around when somebody's feist dog barked clear across town. Anybody could tell that pony was just looking for an excuse to run away.

He got it when Pants Powers and the county official in charge of foreign poker players came wrestling out of the saloon, across the walk, and into the street.

EVERY now and then Pants or the sheriff would get a hand loose and wallop the other one till it sounded like a jack kicking the side of a barn. The sorrel reared back, danced a few steps, and hit the ground running. The girl screamed. Charley jumped over the wrestlers and ran to his mare.

He got her turned around and lined out, and after the third jump she was gaining on the sorrel the way a fast train going downgrade gains on a trestle. By the time they got to the edge of town Charley was having to pull back so hard he could reach over and bat the runaway in the face with his hat.

He got both horses stopped and was standing on the ground by the time Nellie fainted.

She'd never impressed Charley as the fainting kind, but then girls were somethings a man never knew about. Charley caught her in pretty good shape and rested her head in his lap while he fanned her with his hat. He was pretty scared at the time, but later on he would look back and kind of enjoy it.

By the time she was through fainting he'd forgotten about the horses, though the thought crossed his mind that people had probably seen too much of how his mare could run. Slow and gentle, he walked Nellie back to her wagon. Her dad took over then, and Charley couldn't

think of any good excuse not to get out of there and go looking for the horses.

The sheriff stopped him in front of the courthouse. It was the same sheriff, all right, though his face had been changed here and there.

"Man stock-lawed your mare," the sheriff announced.

"I see," Charley said slowly. "What happened to Pants Powers?"

"He's in jail." The sheriff rubbed his right knuckles with his left hand. Then he rubbed his swelling left eye with his right hand. "Let's go."

The prosecuting attorney was his usual affable and businesslike self. He asked the sheriff for details.

"Well, like I said, his mare got in this feller's roastin' ear patch and this feller—" He paused and looked at Beelson.

"George Gibbons?" the prosecutor suggested.

"No. I don't think George planted any sweet corn this year, did he? Just some tomatoes and a row of okrey."

"Tom Wilkinson?"

"Sure he's got a corn patch."

"*Did have* an *awful* good-looking corn patch."

"Yep, that's who it was, all right. Tom Wilkinson. Well, Tom says the damage is pretty heavy. He figures about twenty dollars."

"Well, Mr. Freeley," the prosecutor said, "you know the law. All you have to do is pay Tom his twenty dollars and go get your mare."

"Supposing I won't?" Charley asked.

"Well, you know all about that as well as I do, Mr. Freeley. After a reasonable time the county will have to sell your horse at public auction."

"After I win that horse race—"

The county attorney was shaking his head. "Can't run a race with an impounded horse. Have to forfeit the bets."

Charley didn't say anything for quite awhile. There was just a chance the revolution might have started right then if he hadn't put his gun in his saddle-bags while he was running his horse and for-

[*Turn page*]

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got to get it out again.

"I'll be back," he said finally.

He found Matt Adams and his daughter in the restaurant. "You done any betting on the horse race?" he demanded.

Matt said he had, and the girl looked troubled. Not just serious this time, but troubled.

"Much?" Charley asked grimly.

"What I had." Matt put his fork down. "Matter of fact, I borrowed some money on my trading horses."

"On my horse, too?" Nellie asked quickly.

MATT nodded slowly and looked at Charley. "She means that sorrel she really did raise from a colt," he said. "I've heard a lot about that mare of yours, boy, and I saw Beelson's horse run when I was through here before. Anything the matter?"

Charley didn't answer, because he was busy watching the girl. She'd turned her head away to make a fast swipe at a tear with her napkin. And now Charley knew, as he'd suspected earlier, that when something made that girl unhappy he'd turn the world upside down if that was what it took to get her happy again. He turned back to her father.

"Who took your note?" he asked.

"Curt Beelson. Why?"

Charley didn't answer. He started backing out of there but the girl came up out of her chair and flew across to him. She got hold of the front of his jumper with both hands.

"Charley—Charley!" she choked, and she'd stopped trying to act like she wasn't crying. "I didn't mean it, Charley! I was just talking. Charley, I *want* you to let them get by with it."

"I'll have to see how they act."

Gently he took her by the shoulders and pushed her away, though it sure as the world wasn't what he wanted to do.

He went by for his gun and when he got back to Beelson's office he put his hands on the desk and leaned his chin over toward the prosecutor.

"I'm going out," he said, "to sell my saddle. I'll be right back, and if I was you I wouldn't try to think of any reason not to sell me my horse back while I'm gone."

The prosecutor slid his chair back out of arm's reach and looked at the sheriff.

"We'd better be getting busy on that petition for involuntary bankruptcy," he said. "In the matter of that overdue bill at my saloon."

Charley moved over between the sheriff and the door.

"Go on!" Beelson snapped at the sheriff. "Get to attaching the defendant's property. Saddle and things like that."

Charley started backing away so he'd have both men in front of him when he made his play. But he hadn't got to where he needed to be yet when everybody started smelling wood smoke.

The sheriff ran up the stairs with the county attorney stepping on his heels.

Pants Powers didn't have their courthouse burned down yet but he had a pretty good start. The corn shucks out of his mattress were blazing away, over against the far wall. He'd taken the trouble to knock a lot of plaster away and the pine siding was charred and starting to flame. And Pants Powers was gone.

Well, not really gone, it turned out—just crouched above the door, holding onto the bars like a monkey, where nobody thought to look for him. As soon as the two county officials unlocked the door and ran across to fight the fire Pants jumped down and ran out of the cell.

Charley hit him in the stomach and shoved him back inside. He locked the three of them in, whereupon Pants philosophically went over to help his cellmates put out his fire. Charley stuck the key in his pocket and went across to the Main Street Bar.

"Fixing to organize me some vigilantes," he told the barkeep.

"How many'd you have in mind?" asked Waymond.

"Depends on how good a grade of vigilantes they was."

"I can get you a dandy for about fifty dollars." Waymond reached under the bar and came out with his sawed-off shotgun.

"And I'll throw in for free."

"Sounds reasonable," Charley decided. "Twenty-five dollars a head, on the average."

"You probably ought to know this feller I'm hiring for you is wanted for some things like robbing banks and shooting constables, and he's probably guilty of most of it."

"Tell him to bring plenty of shells." Charley started down the walk.

ADAMS and Nellie caught him as he got to Pants Powers's horse.

"What are you going to do?" Nellie asked. She sounded subdued and scared.

"I'll have to find out," Charley said, as he untied the bedroll from Pants' saddle and started unrolling it in the dust.

"I won't *let* you!" She had hold of his shoulder with both hands, trying to shake him. "They'll kill you!"

"Them children would be just as well off not having any dad at all," he said.

"What?"

"As one so sorry he'd let people rob their mother thataway," he explained.

"What mother?"

Charley straightened up. Pants Powers really *did* keep his money in his other pants. Charley grinned foolishly.

"I'll tell you later," he said. "If I can. If you're interested."

Nellie said she was interested, all right. Said it like she meant it, too. Charley led her to her horse.

Matt Adams watched her mount, look around undecidedly, and ride off toward the wagon. He got a big old .45 Smith and Wesson gun out of his coat pocket and started checking the cylinders.

"Go take care of her," Charley said. "This ain't no fight of yours."

Matt looked after his daughter, then back at Charley. "Guess that's where you're wrong," he said.

Charley shrugged and went to pay off his main vigilante, who turned out to be the poker player who favored Buck Wilhite so much.

"All right," Charley said, just like he

[*Turn page*]

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knew what he was doing. "Waymond, you-all might as well take the back door of the courthouse. I'll go in the front and, Mr. Adams, if you're bound to come along I can't stop you but you stay behind me."

Nothing happened when they got inside and Charley led the way up the stairs. The man standing in the doorway to the jail had his gun out and surprise all on his side. He should have killed both of them easy, but he got in a rush and missed them twice.

This was one of Beelson's witness-scarerers, but if he panicked that quick people must have had him badly overrated. Only Charley kind of panicked, too, before he realized that. He shoved Matt into the nearest office, shot once and missed, and dived into the office himself.

He stuck his head out and wasted two shots trying to hit the gunman in the right shoulder. Then he got desperate, because the rascal was still shooting and coming closer. So he shot right at the middle of him next time, and did hit him in the shoulder. Knocked him down and put him out of the war. They waited for Waymond and his partner, then went through every office without finding anybody.

"They're all in the jail," Charley decided, "tryin' to get Beelson out. They know he's the only one in the bunch got any gumption."

About then somebody eased the jail door open. Charley shot once, high, to encourage them to keep that door shut.

"Waymond," he said, "take your shotgun and your friend down and make a citizen's arrest of the district judge at his rooming house. And take this prisoner by the doctor's house on your way."

Getting the shot-up prisoner in sight on Main Street must have helped a lot, because in about ten minutes three volunteer vigilantes came in pointing guns at a county commissioner they'd captured. It turned out Beelson's other witness-persuader had tried to liberate the judge, and the man who might have been Buck Wilhite's twin brother had to shoot him between the eyes. That was about as far as the counter-revolution ever got.

The uprising went great guns after that. When there were thirty men in the liberation army milling around in the second-floor corridor, and knocking over all the spittoons, Charley told the people in the jail about it and they surrendered.

MADE quite a cellfull when they got them all herded in, so Charley turned Pants Powers loose to relieve the congestion, and deported him as an undesirable. Pants left town at a fast lope without investigating the matter of his other pair of pants. Charley went into the jail and made a speech.

"We'll treat you people the best we can," he said, "till we can get word to the territory capital for them to send a special prosecutor out here to get you-all convicted and hung. It's liable to take quite awhile but we're impounding all the county records so there'll be plenty of evidence. They ought to move right along once they get things started."

Beelson crowded to the front of the cell like he wanted to do some debating, but Charley turned and left.

"You got more faith in an attorney-general that you don't even know his name than I have," Waymond said bitterly.

"Wait," Charley said. He looked at Matt Adams. "Go in there and see what kind of a trade you can make."

Adams got some pencils out of the court clerk's office for whittling purposes and ambled into the jail. Charley found Nellie on the outer fringe of the swelling vigilante band and took her indoors.

At first he tried to back out on explaining about the little brown-eyed boys and girls. He shouldn't have, because when he did tell her she smiled. And it was just like he'd thought.

She was still smiling when Waymond and Matt came looking for them, and Charley wasn't very glad to see them. Matt wasn't too proud of himself.

"That Beelson's a hard man to do business with," he said. "Best I could get you was for 'em to plead guilty to a batch of felonies and let the judge suspend their sentences on the condition they don't

come back to this county. Beelson's drawing up the charges now."

"Be all right," Waymond said, "if he was to want to give me a warranty deed to that land he stole from me. And to tear up some notes he's holding on folks."

"He needs to call off some horse race bets, too," Matt said.

"All right," Charley said. "You-all tend to them things. Matt, I'll take one of your horses and be waiting in the next town west when you and Nellie show up driving my mare and Nellie's sorrel pony she raised from a colt so good he won't run away except on days when she feels faint."

Matt grinned and nodded.

"That'll give me about a day to look over the racehorse situation," Charley said. Then he looked straight at Nellie, bold as a town dog in his own yard. "And I'll be getting a preacher lined up."

Nellie said it seemed like the least he could do for the children. ● ● ●

COLD TRAIL

(Concluded from Page 50)

blur of gunsmoke and leaped for the door where Karlita came into the room.

"Goldy's waiting out behind the tailing heap, Karlita," he said, pulling her back into the night. "We'll be long gone down the canyon before the camp wakes. . . ."

Dawn had arrived when the double-laden sorrel emerged from Placentia Canyon, Karlita Dunning in the saddle, Jim Hatfield behind the cantle.

Two riders were coming toward them at a gallop. One Hatfield recognized as Tom Harkness, who would be taking the long-dead prospector's daughter back to his ranch at his bride. The star flashing on the other horseman's vest identified the sheriff.

Reining up Goldy, the Lone Wolf said:

"You explain things to your future husband and the sheriff, Karlita, while I take a jaunt over to the Overland Telegraph office. I've got to let Captain McDowell know I'm heading on to El Paso—and let your mother know that she owns a gold mine and a new son-in-law." ● ● ●

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WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range

News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

Ely Samuel Parker, full-blooded Seneca Indian, was picked to write the official document ending the Civil War after he was twice refused a commission in the Union Army, despite his unquestionably high intelligence and ability, because he wasn't a United States citizen.

Gold has been discovered accidentally in many ways, but one of the most unusual of all was the case of a California 49'er with the improbable name of Bennanger Raspberry. It seems that "Ben," as we'll call him, made $9500 in three days by shooting the ramrod out of a gun he was cleaning. When he pulled the ramrod out of the ground he discovered a rich gold vein.

It says here that Indians using sign language can converse three times as fast as people speaking words. We wonder if that includes wives, even.

R. H. Stanley is a fellow in Dallas who keeps his business right up to snuff: for that's his business—snuff—and a big one it is in Texas. Over three million pounds a year are bought by Texans, both country folk and city dwellers. 'Snuff said.

After Coronado's conquest in 1540 the horse, mule, burro and ox were introduced in New Mexico. The pack train came into general use after the first permanent settlement in 1598. That's going back such a fur piece we can't rightly recollect it.

The Tarahumares Indians of the Southwest played a game with arrows called lechuguilla. An arrow was shot into the air so it entered the ground upright at least 50 yards away. Opposing players took turns shooting at the target arrow. As in horseshoe pitching, points were awarded for the arrow coming closest to the target.

Lorenzo De Zavala, a signer of the Mexican constitution, was the first vice president of the Texas republic when Texas won its independence from Mexico. Probably wasn't enough vice down thataway at the time to make it worthwhile, though.

Daniel Boone was such a perfect shot he could kill a squirrel without puncturing the hide. He would hit the bark beneath the animal and concussion would kill it. Beat that if you can, Davy Crockett!

Awhile back the winner of a fishing contest in Cheyenne, Wyoming, was a man named Harland Troudt. Tsk, tsk.

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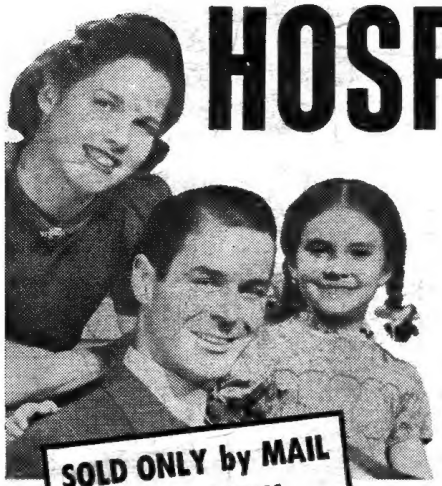

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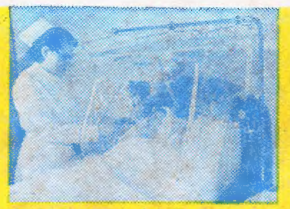

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Go to the Hospital for a day, a week, a month, a year or longer — your "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays Benefits for sickness or accident just as long as you stay — ***there's absolutely no time limit!*** What blessed help! What's more, the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays off in cash direct to you — regardless of what you may collect from any other insurance policy for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. This is important — it means you can carry the low cost "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy IN ADDITION to any other insurance — then collect two ways in case of Hospital confinement.

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